

Stories, Folk Tales and Legends
From the Bible

Arthur G Broadhurst

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Stories, Folk Tales and Legends from the Bible

Prologue

This collection of stories from the Bible was written for families who may not necessarily have a commitment to a particular religious viewpoint, but who wish to become familiar with the biblical stories that are important to the Jewish-Christian-Muslim traditions for their literary and cultural value and for their importance in understanding biblical themes in art, literature, music, drama, and poetry.

These stories are not intended as an attack on fundamentalist views of biblical literalism, although I am sure that some will take it as an offense and an attempt to undermine traditional religious faith. It may have that result, despite this volume having a very different purpose. For many people, including this writer, the bible is important not because it is a collection of sacred stories that should be taken as literally true, but rather because these stories are important culturally to those of us who are the inheritors and beneficiaries of the Judaeo-Christian religious tradition that has made such a significant impact on the culture of the western world. These biblical stories are reflected in the artifacts of our culture—our literature, our art, our music—and we would be aesthetically and intellectually impoverished without a working acquaintance with them.

For many years I have wanted my children and grandchildren to be exposed to religious and moral values, but without the baggage of theological nonsense and anti-intellectualism that seems to pervade much of today's religion-based institutions. I wished for them an education in religion and the literature of religion that was historically accurate, intellectually honest and consistent with what we know about our world and its origins. I wanted my children to become familiar with the bible for its

historical and cultural importance, but not in a Sunday School class taught by a reluctant volunteer who had no knowledge of biblical history, no acquaintance with the literary and historical issues, no education or training in the background of the bible, no awareness of the context of the stories of the Bible, and no ability to distinguish between history and legend, because that would lead to confusion.

However the impetus for this book was a simple request by my daughter to help her find an appropriate book of bible stories for my ten year old grandson, who had expressed an interest in learning about stories from the Bible, and my subsequent inability after several days of diligent searching to find any book that did a satisfactory job of presenting the stories just as they were written, without trying to gloss over inconsistencies or ignoring the context of the story and therefore missing the point, or without an underlying theme or assumption that these were not legends and folk tales, but rather history that told about actual events of the past. The few collections of bible stories for children that I could find were educationally useless and unhelpful for understanding these culturally important stories in their literary and historical context. Having found nothing useful for my grandchildren, I resolved to fill that gap. This collection of stories is the result of that resolution.

I expect it will find a place in the homes of Christians and Jews from the liberal end of the religious spectrum who are not stuck in the clutches of biblical literalism and religious illiteracy, and among our secular neighbors who recognize the cultural importance of these stories but see them for what they are, folk tales and legends from a pre-scientific and pre-historical era that provide images and themes for the imagination of artists and writers and enrich us culturally.

It might helpful to some readers to understand a bit about how these stories came to us. The stories are quite old and initially they were passed down orally through the generations by shepherds and nomads who had no written language. People told stories sitting around campfires in the desert or during communal meals at important religious ceremonies in tents and palaces. We don't know who first told these stories or who first wrote them down. Stories were told for lots of different reasons for many generations, sometimes as a way of remembering events and happenings from the past that were important, sometimes to explain why things happen or why things are the way they are, sometimes to explain religious ceremonies, or differences between people, or why life is difficult, or why bad things happen to good people. The reasons for the stories are many.

Over time some of these stories were adopted or adapted from other cultures that these nomadic tribes had contact with, and some of the stories came down to later generations in different variants. At some point, most likely after 500 B.C., collections of stories were written down, collected into different compilations, edited by priests and scholars into roughly the form they are in today, and finally copied by scribes repeatedly over hundreds of years into different collections of manuscripts only some of which survive today. Then of course they had to be translated into modern languages. This is not the place to discuss the complexities of the documents and their various translations, but those who wish to pursue those questions can find plenty of resources to assist them in that pursuit.

Readers will notice that the term *Yahweh* [or *Lord Yahweh*] appears where many are accustomed to seeing the word *god* and that is for a very important reason. The nomadic tribes that joined together over time to form the Hebrew people (and eventually the Israelites, or people of Israel) call their gods by

specific names and when they referred to their god they used the god's *personal name* (i.e., the *Shield of Abraham*) rather than the generic term *god*. To be faithful to the meaning, but without making the stories too cumbersome or laden with footnotes, I have chosen to use the most common name for their traditional god, *Lord Yahweh*. These early nomadic tribal people believed in many gods (*polytheism*) but they tended to recognize a particular god of their tribal group as patron and guardian to whom they looked for protection and to whom they sacrificed as a form of worship. Put succinctly they believed in many gods but in practice worshipped only their own tribal god (*monolatry*). That concept is accurately reflected in the first of the "*ten commandments*" issued to his people by Lord Yahweh—"You must not acknowledge any other god as more important than me."

In writing these stories I have tried to be faithful to the intent and meaning of each story, sometimes using the more traditional and familiar language of the translations that many are accustomed to, but exercising the literary freedom to change unfamiliar terms and concepts into language where the sense and meaning of the story will come through more clearly and accurately than is conveyed by the traditional language. At the end of each story is a brief comment to help explain aspects of that story that might be useful information to the reader.

Whatever else it may be to various religious groups and religions, the Bible has influenced our literature, our art, our drama, our music, our traditions, our politics, our sense of values, and our culture, and therefore we believe that familiarity with its stories is an important part of everyone's education.

Arthur G Broadhurst

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THE GODS BRING ORDER TO CHAOS

At the beginning of time, which was a very long time ago when our planet was young and there was only a formless, dark, chaotic and empty expanse of ocean everywhere with a mighty wind that raged across the surface of the water, the gods created the earth and the sky. Here is how it happened.

One day Yahweh, god of the Hebrew people, had an idea. He said, “Let there be light,” and suddenly there was light shining on the dark turbulent waters of the vast ocean. Yahweh observed that light was a good idea. Then Yahweh separated the light from the darkness, and he called the light “day” and he called the darkness “night.” That was the first day.

The next day Yahweh said, “Let there be sky in the middle of the water and let the sky separate the water into two parts. So Yahweh made the sky and then he divided the waters that were beneath the sky from the waters that were above the sky—and he called the sky the “heavens.” It all happened just as Yahweh said, and so as the evening arrived the second day came to an end.

On the third day Yahweh said, “Let the waters under the heavens be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land of the continents appear”; and it happened just as he said. Yahweh called the dry land “earth”; and the waters that he gathered together he called “seas.” Yahweh liked the results of his work and concluded that he had done well.

Then Yahweh said, “Let the earth grow grass and plants yielding seeds to reproduce themselves, and the fruit trees yielding fruit, each with seeds inside the fruit to reproduce more fruit. Once again it happened—the words that Yahweh spoke resulted in things happening just as he said. Grass appeared from the earth

and plants grew that bore seeds, and trees grew yielding fruit containing seeds within the fruit to make more fruit. Once again Yahweh saw that the result of his labor was good. He worked all day and so the third day ended.

The next day Yahweh said, “Let there be lights in the sky to divide the day from the night. Let these great lights in the sky be used as guides for sailors to navigate the seas and for determining the seasons of the year, for distinguishing the days of the week and for measuring the cycle of years.” So Yahweh made two great lights, a powerful bright sun to rule the day and a weaker moon to rule the night. He also made the stars and put them in the night sky. Yahweh put the sun, the moon and the stars in the sky to give light to the earth, to rule over the day and over the night, and to separate the light from the darkness. Yahweh saw that he had done well. So the morning and the evening ended the fourth day.

The next day when Yahweh looked around he noticed that the earth and the sea were empty of life, so Yahweh said, “Let the waters bring forth lots of living creatures to crawl about and inhabit the earth and birds to fly above the earth in the sky.” So Yahweh created great whales and creatures of all kinds, the insects that crawl on the earth, and the fish that swim in the seas. He created animals that came from the sea, which the waters brought forth in great quantities, each with its own species, and he created every type of bird and other winged creatures.

Yahweh saw that the fish and the insects and the creatures from the sea he had created were good and he was pleased with his work. So Yahweh blessed the creatures he had made and told them to “be fruitful, and multiply, and spread throughout the land and fill the waters in the seas, and may the birds of the air fill the skies.” So ended the fifth day.

The next day Yahweh said, “Let the earth bring forth the many species of animals, each reproducing its own species, cattle, and creeping things, and beasts of the earth;” and it happened just as he said. So Yahweh made the animals, the wild beasts of the earth, and the cattle, each a separate species, and he created every species that creeps on the earth; and Yahweh saw that the animals were a good addition to the earth.

So far there were no people, so Yahweh said to the gods, “Let us make human beings in our image, to look like us gods, and let them rule over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle—the people we make will rule over all the earth and over every creeping thing that crawls upon the earth.” So Yahweh created human beings to look like him, and he created both males and females. Yahweh favored the new people he had made and said unto them, “Be productive and increase the population and fill the earth with people. You are in charge here. Rule over the earth, the fish of the sea, the birds in the air, and over every living thing that moves or crawls upon the earth. I give you control over every plant everywhere on all the earth, and over every tree that bears fruit, and they are for your food. I give you every animal on the earth, and every bird in the air, and every thing that crawls on the earth—every living thing I have given you for food.”

Yahweh saw all the things that he had made, and observed that it was a pretty good job and he was proud of himself. Evening came, and it was the end of the sixth day.

Yahweh had been working creating things for six straight days and he was exhausted from all that work creating the earth, the sky, the creatures inhabiting the earth, and all of humanity, so on the seventh day he rested.

People long ago, just as we are, were curious about how our world was created. They attempted to answer questions about the origins of our universe and our own origins as human beings with common sense observations. They created stories that helped explain *how* and *why* our universe exists. Most cultures and traditions have stories to explain their world. This story reflects an earlier story from Mesopotamia known as the *Enuma Elish*, the story of the beginnings.

Today most people around the world answer questions about the origins of our universe with scientific explanations from astronomy, geology, biology and physics, rather than with pre-scientific stories and myths. Some fundamentalist religious groups believe that the biblical story of creation is a literal description of how our world was created and so they reject scientific explanations. This creation story attempts to explain such questions as where water comes from when it rains, why Jews and Christians recognize the 7th day of week as a day of rest, and why human beings are the dominant species on earth.

It was obvious to people that there was water “beneath,” because they found water when they dug a well; it was also obvious that there was a reservoir of water “above the sky,” because that was where water came from when the skies were opened and the rain came down. They believed the sky was like an inverted bowl with holes that let the light through at night (the stars) and kept the water that was above the sky from falling until the sky was “opened” so that rain could fall.

Yahweh is the **personal name** of the god of the Hebrew tribes. In most modern translations of the bible the generic word *god* is used, but that word means any god. The language of the bible in Hebrew actually uses the god's name, *Yahweh* (which was wrongly translated as *Jehovah* in older English translations).

IT'S ALWAYS THE WOMAN'S FAULT!

This is the story of the beginning of the world before there was sky and earth, the story of how the Lord Yahweh made the earth and the heavens and every plant that grows in the fields.

The land was hot and dry because the Lord Yahweh had not yet created rain on the earth, and there was not yet a man to cultivate the ground, so nothing could grow.

The Lord Yahweh caused a heavy mist to rise from the earth and water the ground. Then the Lord Yahweh formed a man from the dirt of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life and the man became a living human being.

Then the Lord Yahweh planted a beautiful garden far to the east in a land called Eden and he placed the man that he had made in that far off garden.

Out of the ground the Lord Yahweh made the trees grow so that we could enjoy looking at them and enjoy food from them. He planted two special trees in the middle of the garden—the “tree of life” and the “tree of knowledge of good and evil.”

A river flowed out from the land of Eden to water the garden that Lord Yahweh had made and from there the river separated into four branches. The name of the first is the River Pison in the desert land of Havilah, where there is gold, aromatic spices and onyx stone. The second river is Gihon, which flows to Ethiopia. The third river is Hiddekel, which flows toward the east to Assyria. The fourth river is the Euphrates.

The Lord Yahweh took the man he had created and placed him in the garden of Eden and told him to take care of it and to maintain it. He gave the man very specific instructions. He told him, “You can eat fruit from every tree in the garden except for

one, the 'tree of the knowledge of good and evil.' That one tree is off limits. Don't eat the fruit of that tree or you will die."

Then the Lord Yahweh thought, "Living all by himself with no animals and no people is not a good situation for man—he will be lonely and bored—so I will give him something to do." So from the ground the Lord Yahweh made every beast of the field and every bird in the air; and he brought them to the man that he called *Adam* and told him to give all the animals and birds names, and whatever Adam decided to name every living creature, that was the name by which it was known from then on.

Adam was busy but he was still lonely because he had no human companion. The Lord Yahweh then decided to create another human being so that Adam would not be lonely. He caused Adam to fall into a deep sleep and while he slept the Lord Yahweh took out one of his ribs and closed up the flesh, and from the rib that he had taken from the man he made a woman, and brought her to the man and gave her to him.

After he thought about it Adam said, "This woman was made from my bones and from my flesh; she shall be called *woman*, because she was taken out of *man*." That is the reason a man leaves his father and his mother and joins his wife in marriage and they live together and are joined together as husband and wife.

Adam and Eve were both naked in the garden and they were not embarrassed.

There was a serpent lurking in the garden. He was smarter and more devious than any other animal that the Lord Yahweh had made. One day the serpent said to Eve, "Didn't the Lord Yahweh say that you could eat the fruit from any of the trees in the garden?"

“Not exactly,” said Eve to the serpent. “He told us that we may eat the fruit of any of the trees in the garden except the fruit of the tree in the middle of the garden. The Lord Yahweh said that if we eat the fruit of that tree, or even if we touch it, we will die.”

The serpent laughed. “That's not true,” he said to Eve. “You will not die. The Lord Yahweh knows that if you eat the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil that you will become wise like the gods, you will know the difference between good and evil, and you will no longer be an innocent child-like creature.”

So Eve went over to the “tree of the knowledge of good and evil” to see for herself. She saw beautiful ripe fruit on the tree that looked ready to eat and good for food, and when she thought about acquiring the knowledge and wisdom of the gods, she picked some fruit from the tree and ate it, and handed some to her husband Adam, who was standing beside her, and he ate some of the fruit also.

Suddenly they lost their innocence and they became self-conscious and aware that they were naked. To cover their nakedness they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves robes.

Soon they heard footsteps approaching through the woods. It was the Lord Yahweh walking in the garden in the cool of the day. Adam and his wife were suddenly afraid because they were aware of their guilt and hid from the Lord Yahweh among the trees of the garden.

Lord Yahweh couldn't find Adam, so he called out, “Adam, where are you?”

Adam said, "I'm over here, among the trees. I heard you walking in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked, so I hid myself among the trees."

The Lord Yahweh replied, "Who told you that you were naked? Did you eat fruit from the tree that I told you not to touch?"

Adam said guiltily, "That woman you made to be my companion and wife gave me some fruit from the tree and I ate it."

The Lord Yahweh said to Eve, "What have you done?"

Eve answered, "It's the serpent's fault. The serpent talked me into it, so I ate some of the fruit."

So the Lord Yahweh turned to the serpent and said, "Because you caused this trouble for me, you will be cursed above all cattle, and above every beast of the field. From now on you will crawl on your belly along the ground and you will eat dirt for the rest of your life. Women will be afraid of you and hate you, and so will their children. You will bite the legs of women and they will stomp you to death in fear."

Then the Lord Yahweh turned to Eve and said, "Because you ate the forbidden fruit, I will make you suffer during childbirth. You will deliver your children in pain, and your children will bring you sadness throughout your life. From now on, you will have to obey and serve your husband and he will rule over you."

Finally he turned to Adam and said, "Because you listened to your wife, and ate fruit from the tree that I told you not to touch, no longer will you be able to live in this garden or eat the fruit that I put here for you. I am kicking you out of this garden. You will have to make your own garden and grow your own food. Thistles, thorns and weeds will grow in your garden. You will have to work long and hard to earn a living cultivating the

hard and barren earth, which I have cursed because of you. You will have a difficult and sad life.

“Hereafter your food will be the crops you grow in the gardens you plant, and by hard work and sweat you will work for your survival all the days of your life until you die and return to the ground out of which you were made, for you were made from the dust and dirt of the ground and to dust and dirt you will return at your death.”

Then the Lord Yahweh said to his fellow gods, “The man I created has become like us now that he has eaten the fruit from the tree of knowledge and is no longer innocent. He has become like us gods now that he can distinguish between good and evil. Before he reaches out and takes and eats from the tree of life, and becomes a god who lives forever, man must be removed from the garden.”

So the Lord Yahweh expelled Adam and Eve from the garden in the land of Eden and returned them to the land from which they had come. From now on they would have to farm the hard earth from which Adam had been made.

After he drove Adam from the garden the Lord Yahweh placed a winged guardian with a flaming sword at the entrance of the garden to guard the tree of life. Humans would not be able to get at the fruit of that tree, and they would not live forever like the gods.

People who lived a long time ago all over the world from many different cultures told stories about the origins of their world. This creation story comes immediately after the first creation story in the biblical book of Genesis and gives a quite different version of creation. In this story man is created first, before the animals and plants, and the woman was created last. The description of *Eden* places it east of Canaan, in the vicinity of modern Iraq, between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. The first story started with the chaotic dark waters of the ocean. This story starts with hot, dry barren land that reminds us of the desert, which Yahweh makes productive with water from a mist or heavy fog. It reflects the origins of the Hebrew people as desert nomads.

We learn from this story about the origin of marriage and family, why humans are superior to the animals, how animals got their names, the secondary position of women to men, why we wear clothes, why people do not live forever, why life is so hard, why snakes crawl on the ground, why (unlike among animals) childbirth is painful and dangerous for women, and why women were expected to serve their husbands and obey them.

A long time ago people observed that animals had a much easier life than humans. Animals could eat grass or other vegetation, or the wild animals could catch and eat their prey, but most of the time life for animals was pretty easy, compared to that of humans who had a hard life as they farmed the land to try to raise their food, or herded their sheep day and night, or guarded their cattle from predators while they took care to see that the cattle were watered and fed.

This story explains the hardship of human life as punishment for disobeying Yahweh and for competing with the gods by acquiring the knowledge that raised them from being animals. We picture a jealous and angry Yahweh intent on punishing humans and their children forever for their audacity in assuming they could be like the gods.

THE CONFLICT BETWEEN FARMERS AND SHEPHERDS

Now that he had been ejected from the garden, Adam made a home for himself on the land where he had been created. Adam intercourse with his wife Eve. Soon after she became pregnant and gave birth to her first son, Cain. Eve announced happily that Yahweh had given her a son. Then she got pregnant again. This time she gave birth to her second son, Abel.

Abel was a shepherd, a keeper of sheep, but Cain was a farmer, who grew crops from the land he farmed.

In time, as was customary in those days, Cain and Abel each offered a gift to Yahweh. Each brought to Yahweh the best that he had. Cain, the farmer, brought a gift of fruits and vegetables that he had raised on his farm and offered it to Yahweh. Abel, the shepherd, brought young lambs from his flock of sheep and laid them on the altar as a gift to Yahweh.

Yahweh liked Abel and his offering of young lambs, but he did not like Cain's offering of fruits and vegetables and disrespectfully told him so. Cain was very angry, hurt and upset.

Yahweh said to Cain, "Why are you angry? Why do you look so upset? If you do the right thing you will be able to hold your head up with pride; if not, be careful what you say and get yourself under control or bad things will happen."

A few days later when the brothers were working out in the fields, Cain suddenly attacked his brother and killed him, and then went home as if nothing had happened.

Yahweh came by later that afternoon and said to Cain, "Where is your brother Abel?"

Cain said, "I don't know where he is. I am not my brother's keeper. Abel is not my problem. Am I supposed to care about what happens to him?"

Yahweh replied, "What have you done, Cain? I hear the voice of your brother's blood crying to me from the earth seeking revenge. As punishment for killing Abel you are now banished from the land, which has been polluted by your brother's blood. From now on any land that you try to cultivate will be barren and will not produce crops and you will be a fugitive and a vagabond on the earth."

Cain said to Yahweh, "My punishment is too much, it is greater than I can bear. You have driven me from the land. I will hide my face from you. I will become a fugitive and a vagabond, and as I wander on the earth anyone who finds me will kill me."

"No," said Yahweh. "That will not happen. I have put a mark on you that identifies who you are, and I have put out the word that anyone who harms you, I will do to him seven times worse than he did to you."

With the assurance that he would not be harmed, Cain left the area and moved to the land of Nod, on the east side of Eden.

Cain's wife shortly after became pregnant and gave birth to her son Enoch, who built a city and named it Enoch, after himself.

Enoch's great-great grandson, Lamech, had two wives and each had sons, one of whom was the father of people that dwell in tents and have cattle, another son was the father of people who play the harp and the organ, and a third son was an instructor of all those who are skilled in making brass and iron tools and metal weapons.

Folk tales sometimes serve as simple explanations of complex relationships. Cain and Abel represent different tribal traditions and this story explains the struggle between two ways of life in the ancient world, agriculture and farming. The Hebrew people were shepherds and nomadic wanderers and were among many nomadic peoples that moved into the grasslands of Canaan in the second millennium B.C., living between the cities of Canaan, whose inhabitants lived in walled cities surrounded by crop land that they farmed.

Conflict between shepherds and farmers was inevitable, and eventually the Hebrew people took over much of the land, driving out those who lived there. Israel's god *Yahweh* gave them victory. The story shows the struggle between the farmers (who were in the land first) and the nomadic shepherds. *Yahweh*'s lack of interest in offerings of agricultural produce and his preference for animal sacrifice was because he was the god of the nomadic shepherds. The story justifies revenge attacks by Hebrews on the Canaanites (who were there first, but as their punishment they were thrown off their land) and incidentally explains why people have different traditions and technical skills.

YAHWEH FLOATS NOAH'S BOAT

The population began to grow rapidly all across the earth. There were lots of beautiful girls among all those people of the earth. The sons of Yahweh were watching the earth people and when they saw these pretty girls they made them their wives.

The marriage of gods with women produced children who became giants, strong and powerful men, heroes who became famous for their deeds and lived hundreds of years—but they were also evil men who did bad things and thought bad thoughts and were always thinking about what even more evil things they could do.

At that time so very long ago people lived for a long time, often hundreds of years. Yahweh decided that he was tired of dealing with the troublesome and evil people he had made. He was tired of trying to get humans to behave. One day Yahweh said to himself, “People would be a lot less trouble if they did not live so long.” So he shortened the lifespan of humans to a limit of 120 years.

Yahweh became increasingly frustrated that the race of man was responsible for so much that is bad in the world—violence and wars, trouble making and fighting among neighbors, corruption and evil thoughts and desires. Yahweh became so disgusted with people that he was sorry he had made them, so he decided to destroy them all. He said to himself, “I will wipe out this race of man I have created; I will destroy all the people, along with the animals, the birds and all living things on the earth.”

However Yahweh noticed that Noah and his three sons, Shem, Ham and Japheth, were honorable and good men—the only good people in the entire world. So Yahweh said to Noah, “All humanity is evil and violent. I am going to end it. I am going to

destroy mankind and all living things, Noah, except for you. I am not going to destroy you along with everyone else.”

“This is what you have to do to save yourself and your family. You must make a very large boat, 450 feet long, 75 feet wide, and 45 feet high, three stories high, with one window 18 inches square for ventilation. After you finish building the boat I am going to bring a flood that will destroy the whole earth. Everything on earth will die in the flood.”

“So,” continued Yahweh. “You have seven days. After the boat is built, you and your sons, and their families and their children, are to get on board the boat. You are to take with you two of every living thing, one male and one female, from every species on earth—animals, birds, cattle, insects—all of the hundreds of thousands of species. Also, you are to take on board all the food necessary to feed your family and keep the animals alive.”

So Noah did as he was told, built the huge boat and loaded two of each animal species into the boat, along with all the provisions and supplies that they would need during the time that the earth was flooded.

After seven days the rains came. The waters that were beneath the earth rose up to flood the land, and the water that was above the sky came down as rain, and the flood of waters from above and below the earth began to cover the earth. It rained steadily for forty days and forty nights. As the water rose it floated Noah's boat and it was lifted as high as the mountains. The waters rose above the hills and covered everything. All living things on earth died—all the cattle, the birds, the animals, the creepy crawly things, and, of course, all the people. Everything died. Only Noah, and his family, and the animals on the boat were left alive.

Yahweh remembered that Noah and his family were still on the boat. So after forty days Yahweh stopped the water flowing upward from the fountains of deep waters under the earth, he shut off the rain falling from the heavens above the earth, and he caused a powerful wind to blow across the earth to cause the land to dry. After 150 days the waters began to recede. The waters decreased continually until after 300 days the tops of the mountains were seen. The boat came to rest on the mountains of Ararat in the Arabian peninsula.

Noah opened the window of the boat and released a dove into the sky to see if the waters had receded enough to find land, but the dove returned to the boat because there was no dry land. Seven days later Noah sent out the dove again, and this time the dove returned in the evening with an olive branch in its mouth. After another seven days, he sent out the dove again, and this time the dove did not return. Now Noah knew that the flood was over and the waters that had covered the earth had dried up, so Noah removed the covering of the boat, looked out and saw that the surface of the ground was dry.

Then Yahweh spoke to Noah and said, “Noah, you and your wife and your sons and your sons' wives are to leave the boat now, and take with you all of the living things in the boat—the birds, the cattle, the creeping things—and release them so that they may breed abundantly all across the earth, and be fruitful, and multiply.”

So Noah and his family left the boat, along with all the animals. Then Noah built an altar for sacrifices to the Lord Yahweh, and Noah sacrificed some of the animals and burned them on the altar.

The Lord Yahweh smelled the sweet pungent smoke from the burning sacrifices and felt bad for all the damage he had done.

He said in his heart, "I know man is evil and that his thoughts and imaginings are evil, but never again will I curse the ground or destroy the earth, nor will I ever again destroy everything living, as I have just done. As long as the earth exists, planting and harvest, heat and cold, summer and winter, day and night, shall not end."

So Yahweh said to Noah, and his sons, and his family, "Here is my unbreakable pledge to you, and to your descendants, and to every living creature that got off the boat with you, all birds and cattle, all animals of the earth: I PROMISE that never again will I cause a flood to destroy the earth. As a sign of my promise to you and to every living creature, I have placed a rainbow in the sky among the clouds, so that whenever it rains the rainbow that follows will remind me and you of my promise to you."

Stories of great floods in the distant past are reflected in the traditions of many countries throughout the Near East, from Egypt all the way to Mesopotamia. When floods came suddenly, as they did frequently in river valleys particularly after periods of heavy rain and violent storms, they would wipe out people, animals, food and homes, and people would have to start life over again after the flood.

In the bible there are two different flood stories involving Noah. Many of the details are the same between the two stories, but there are also very big differences—the other version of the Noah story differs about how many animals were taken aboard the ark, the length of time it rained, how long it took for the earth to dry up after the rain, etc., but since the stories are substantially similar the second one will not be included in this collection of stories.

The Noah stories reflect an earlier story from Babylonia known as *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, a story that the Hebrew people would have known from their years in captivity in Babylonia.

Like most of these stories, there are important questions answered: Why do devastating widespread floods occur? Will there be another devastating flood someday? Why do we sacrifice animals on the altar during religious ceremonies? Why is there a rainbow in the sky after rains?

BABBLING IN BABYLON

After the flood Yahweh was good to Noah and his family. He encouraged them to have lots of children so they could increase the population of the earth, since there weren't any people left after the flood except Noah and his family.

Yahweh told Noah that from now on, "Every animal on earth, all the cattle and the wild beasts, every bird in the air, everything that crawls on the earth and all the fishes of the sea shall be afraid of you. I give them all to you, along with all growing things, to be your food. But there is one rule you must obey when you eat animals. You must drain their blood before you eat their meat. The life of the animal is in the blood, and you must not eat their life, only the meat of their body after the life has been drained from it."

Yahweh continued with an additional instruction for Noah. "You may not take the life of another human being. A man's life is in his blood. The blood belongs to me. If any man takes the life of another, I require that his life be taken also. Whoever sheds the blood of another, his blood must be shed, for I made man in the image of the gods."

After the flood Noah became a farmer. He planted a vineyard and raised grapes for wine. After the harvest he made wine from the grapes he had grown in his vineyard. It was good wine so he drank a lot of it and he got drunk. He was lying naked on his bed in his tent when Ham, his youngest son, walked into the tent and saw his father lying there naked and went outside and told his brothers.

The older brothers, Shem and Japheth, put a blanket over their shoulders between them and walked into the tent backwards so that they would not see Noah naked. They laid the blanket over

Noah. Soon Noah woke up from his drunken sleep and realized that his youngest son, Ham, had seen him naked. He was very angry, and to punish Ham, he spoke a curse to Ham's son, Canaan. The words of a curse have the power to bring about the curse. So Noah cursed Canaan, saying: "You will become a servant to the servants of your brothers Shem and Japheth."

Noah's children, and their children, populated the whole earth and became the founders of the various nations of the world and established great cities. Everyone on earth spoke the same language.

Descendants of Ham, the son of Noah, journeyed to the east and settled in the land of Sumer in the plains of Mesopotamia. They built the kingdoms of Babylon and Assyria. The people who lived in Babylon said to one another, "Let us make bricks, and burn them in the fire to make them hard like stone, and let us use mud for mortar, and let's build a city with these mud bricks and let's build a high tower in the city that will reach up into the sky to the heavens. We will become known as great builders of a powerful nation so that other nations will fear us—because if they are afraid of us they will not try to conquer us, or take our lands or scatter our people far across the earth."

The Lord Yahweh heard the commotion from their large construction project and came down to see what the men of Babylon were building. Thousands of men were working to build the new city. Yahweh saw the tower they were building projecting high up into the sky and he was worried. "If they succeed at doing this," he thought, "then nothing will be beyond the ability of men to do."

So the Lord Yahweh and the other gods developed a plan to stop them. "Since they all have one language, they can work together, and they can accomplish anything that they can

imagine. So let us go down there and cause them to speak different languages so that they cannot understand each other.”

The Lord Yahweh caused the people to speak many different languages so that they could not communicate with each other. The people could not work together because they could not understand each other's language so all the work on the city and the tower ended. Then Yahweh scattered the various peoples speaking different languages into different places throughout the world. Yahweh called the place of construction “Babel” because the confusion of language left all men babbling among themselves and no one could understand them.

This story comes from the time in the history of the Hebrew people after they returned to the land from which they had been taken as prisoners to Babylonia years before. This was a period in which the priests of the land of Israel were becoming important and there were religious rules and rituals created as part of their religious observance. This story provides an explanation for why blood must be drained from meat before it was cooked, why the death penalty was justified for the taking of a life, why the Babylonians had built a huge stepped tower at Ur, and why people speak different languages.

THE RICH AND HAPPY CAMPER

Abraham was born in the Sumerian city of Ur in ancient Mesopotamia. As a young man Abraham had moved to Haran in northern Mesopotamia where he lived with his wife Sarah. Abraham and Sarah had no children, but after his brother died Abraham took his brother's son, Lot, into his home and raised him like a son.

One day Yahweh came to see Abraham and said to him, "Pack your bags. I want you to leave your home and move to the land of Canaan. Take your family and your possessions with you. I am going to make you the father of a great nation. I will protect you and see that things go well for you and you will prosper and become wealthy. Whoever treats you well will be rewarded and whoever does not treat you well will feel my anger."

Abraham did as he was told. In a few days he began the long journey with his family, his relatives, some friends, and all his possessions, from Haran, a city in northern Mesopotamia where he had been living and where he had made his home, to the land of Canaan. When he arrived at the shrine of Shechem he stopped and camped there near the sacred oak tree worshiped by the people in that area of Canaan.

Lord Yahweh appeared to Abraham suddenly and said to him, "I am giving all this land around here to your descendants." Abraham was grateful and built an altar to Yahweh beside the sacred oak tree. From there Abraham set off to investigate this new land, arriving eventually in the vast desert known as the Negev. There was a famine in the desert, crops would not grow and the animals could not find grass on which to graze, so Abraham and his nomadic companions moved on until they arrived at the border of Egypt.

Just before he entered Egypt, he said to his wife Sarah, "Look Sarah, you are a beautiful woman. When we get to Egypt the men there will see how beautiful you are and they will want you for themselves. If they know I am your husband they will kill me to get me out of the way so they can have you. So here's the plan. We will tell them that you are my sister. Then I will be safe and my life will be spared."

When Abraham entered Egypt the Egyptian border guards noticed that Sarah was very beautiful and the word quickly got to Pharaoh that a young attractive woman had entered the country so Pharaoh sent his servants to get Sarah and take her to his palace to become one of the women in his harem. Because he liked Sarah he was good to Abraham, who he thought was her brother, and gave him gifts of sheep, oxen, donkeys, male and female slaves, and camels, which was customary payment to the nearest male relative when taking a wife.

Yahweh was angry that Pharaoh had taken Sarah as his wife, so he made Pharaoh and those who lived in his palace very sick. Pharaoh's priests then told Pharaoh that the illnesses were his punishment for taking another man's wife. The surprised Pharaoh then called Abraham to him and confronted him about trying to pass off Sarah as his sister. He said to Abraham, "Why did you do this? You have caused me a lot of trouble. My friends and family are sick because of you. Why didn't you tell me that Sarah was your wife? Why did you tell me she was your sister? Take Sarah, and get out of my palace and out of my country."

So Pharaoh gave his men orders to send Abraham away, along with his wife, his family and all his possessions. Abraham left Egypt with Sarah and his nephew Lot and his friends and relatives, and traveled back to the Negev desert, where he had

made his camp years before and where he had built an altar for sacrifices to his family god. Abraham was now a very rich man, with much livestock, silver and gold that Pharaoh had given him.

When they got back to the Negev desert Abraham and Lot decided that the land was not large enough to support both of them and their families and retainers, because each of them had flocks and herds, and many tents and people, and there were often fights between their herders and their fellow countrymen. They needed more land for their tribes.

So Abraham said to Lot, "It is not good for us to quarrel among ourselves, or for our herders to fight one another, because we are relatives of the same tribal family. So that we and our people do not have an occasion to fight with each other, let us go our separate ways. You go one way, I will go the other."

Lot looked into the distance and saw that the plain of the Jordan River had plenty of water and the land was fertile like the land of Egypt, so he settled there close to the city of Sodom. Abraham took his tribal followers and went in the other direction and settled in the land of Canaan.

Yahweh said to Abraham, after Lot had left, "Look around you in all directions, for all the land that you see I will give to you and to your offspring forever. I will make your offspring as many as the sands of the earth, and just as the sands are too many to count, so your descendants will be too many to be counted." So Abraham moved his tent and settled by the sacred oaks at Hebron and there he built an altar to Lord Yahweh.

In those days there were many city states throughout the whole region of Canaan, each with its own king, and there were constant fights among the city states, which made alliances with their neighbors to fight other cities. In one of these wars the King of Sodom and his allies were defeated. Lot, who lived near

Sodom, was captured and taken away as a prisoner of war, along with his herds and his possessions. One of the prisoners escaped and went to Abraham to tell him what had happened.

When Abraham heard that his nephew Lot, his family and servants had all been taken captive, he assembled a force of trained fighters, all men of his tribe, three hundred eighteen of them, and went in pursuit of the enemy and found them. When night came he split his forces and attacked the enemy camp from two sides and chased the enemy away. He freed his nephew Lot and recovered Lot's goods and possessions, all his slaves, his women and the rest of his tribe who had been captured with him.

The King of Sodom was grateful and went to meet Abraham on his victorious return to thank him. Melchizedek, an ally of the King of Sodom who was also priest of the Canaanite god known as *God Most High*, brought bread and wine, and the allies had a great feast to celebrate the victory. Abraham offered the kings who helped him ten percent of all the goods and cattle that had been captured in the war as their fee for their services.

The King of Sodom said, "Just give me my people back, my countrymen and my servants, and you can keep all the stuff you captured as your reward."

But Abraham said to the King of Sodom, "I swore an oath to *God Most High* that I would not keep anything that is yours, so that you could not say that you made me rich. I will take nothing but what the young men have eaten, and the share of goods that belongs to the men who went with me. Let my soldiers take their share."

That said, Abraham and his followers went home.

Abraham and his sons are called *aliens* or *foreigners*, and this seems to reflect a conscious and valid historical memory by later Israelites about their Hebrew ancestors who were outsiders among the Canaanites, nomadic shepherds who wandered from place to place seeking pastures for their flocks of sheep and goats, unwilling to become city dwellers, setting up their tents in the open land around the cities, and frequently coming into conflict with the Canaanite city dwellers over land and water rights.

Historians believe that Abraham, regardless of whether he is a real person, represents one strand of tribal ancestors of the Hebrews, who remembered their origins in Mesopotamia, particularly from the Amorite territory of Haran in northern Mesopotamia, and who were part of the large group of nomadic peoples who moved into Canaan early in the second millennium B.C.

The story is not so much about the person Abraham as about his tribe and it is likely that time was telescoped to produce a narrative, when the facts were much more complex. For instance the story about Abraham's birth in Ur, his move with his family 600 miles north to Haran, and his later journey south to Canaan, may have actually occurred over several generations.

Lot is described as the nephew of Abraham, also from Haran. Later in the story Lot is seen as the head of a separate tribe. Lot and Abraham are the ancestors of separate but related tribes, both probably moving into Canaan in the Amorite movement into the area.

YAHWEH BARGAINS WITH ABRAHAM

Abraham and Sarah were getting quite old, well past the age when most parents have children. Sarah was worried that she was too old to become a mother. She had an Egyptian slave girl who was young and pretty, so Sarah went to Abraham one day and said to him, "Abraham, I haven't been able to have a child. Take my slave girl Hagar as another wife and go to bed with her and get her pregnant and have a child with her so I can have a son."

Abraham agreed, so one evening Sarah brought Hagar to Abraham, and he took her into his bed as his second wife and slept with her, and soon she was pregnant.

Once Hagar was pregnant her attitude toward Sarah changed. Hagar became rude and insolent and looked on Sarah with hostility and contempt. Sarah went to Abraham and said to him, "Hagar has forgotten her place and is treating me badly. I gave my slave girl to you as your second wife so that we could have a child—but now that she is pregnant with your child she thinks she can get away with insulting me and treating me with contempt."

Abraham said to her, "Sarah, she's your slave. You are in charge. Do whatever you want to her." Now that she had Abraham's permission, Sarah punished Hagar and treated her harshly, so Hagar ran away.

Then a messenger sent by Yahweh found Hagar crying and sitting by a spring of water in the wilderness and asked her, "Hagar, slave girl of Sarah, what are you doing here?"

Hagar replied, "I am running away from my mistress Sarah."

The messenger said to Hagar, "Go home. Return to your mistress and do what she tells you to do. You are pregnant and will soon give birth to a son. His name will be Ishmael. He will become a wild ass of a man. He will be a troublemaker. He will fight with everyone and everyone will fight with him, and he will forever live in conflict with all his family."

Hagar returned to Sarah and—just as the messenger of Yahweh promised—Hagar soon bore Abraham a son, and Abraham named his son Ishmael.

Abraham was now quite old. One day Yahweh appeared to him and said, "I am *Yahweh The Almighty*. I'll make a deal with you, Abraham. If you agree to make me your god and worship only me and ignore the other gods, and you make sacrifices and give offerings to me and obey me no matter what I tell you to do, I promise to give you many descendants. You will become the father of many nations. I will make you rich and famous and the father of kings."

"This agreement between me and you will last forever, and it will continue between me and your offspring through the generations to come. So long as you keep this agreement I promise to be your god and the god of your children after you, forever. I will give you and your children, and their children, all the land where you are now an outsider and an alien. I will help you conquer all the land of Canaan and it shall be your land forever."

"So, Abraham, if you agree to my conditions, I will be your god, I will watch out for you and protect you, and I will see that you conquer the land of Canaan."

Yahweh continued, "You have duties under this contract, Abraham. You and your descendants after you must agree to keep me as your god forever. As a sign of your agreement and a

reminder of your promise to me, you, your servants, everyone who lives with you, all members of your tribe and every one of your male descendants must be circumcised. Throughout all the generations of your descendants every male among you must be circumcised when he is eight days old. That includes slaves born in your house and slaves that you buy or capture. From now on any male who is not circumcised shall be excluded from my people and from my protection."

"As for Sarah, your wife, I promise that she will become pregnant soon and that she will provide you with a son so that you can be the father of many nations to come."

Abraham fell down laughing. "My Lord Yahweh, you have got to be kidding me. I'm 90 years old. I'm too old to become a father, and Sarah is too old to become a mother. Why don't you just remove the curse you put on Ishmael and recognize him as my son instead of giving me a new son?"

Yahweh said, "That's not the plan, Abraham. I'm serious about this. You and Sarah soon will have a son, and she will become the mother of nations. Ishmael who was born to your slave Hagar, will not inherit. However I heard your request about Ishmael. I will remove the curse and I will be generous to him and make him fruitful and he shall become the father of his own people, but my agreement with you will be through your son Isaac, whom Sarah shall bear to you at this season next year."

When he had finished talking with him, Yahweh left Abraham. Then Abraham gathered together his son Ishmael and every male among his relatives and his followers. He took out his knife and circumcised them that very day, just as Yahweh had ordered.

The gods of nomadic people such as these Hebrews are literally family gods who were believed to watch out for the interests of a tribe and its leader. As its part of the deal the tribe makes offerings in payment to its god to seal the contract. The “contract” which Abraham’s god proposed recognizes that implicit relationship. These nomads were not *monotheists* (believers that there is only one god), they were actually *polytheists* (people who believe that there were many gods), but in practice they tended to favor a special relationship with their personal household and tribal god.

The origins of male circumcision are lost in time, but this story “explains” the practice as being required by their god as a mark of their long term relationship and contractual agreement. The story answers the question, why do our people practice male circumcision when other people do not.

It was the custom among Amorites, whose home base was in Haran, for men whose wives did not bear children to father children with their slaves, since children were very important to nomadic people, and the laws of the time provided for certain rights to accrue to these secondary wives. In this story it is interesting that Ishmael, who is described as a “wild ass of a man, fighting with everyone,” is acknowledged by Muslims to be their spiritual father and their link to Abraham.

SODOM, SEX AND SISTERS

The Lord Yahweh suddenly appeared to Abraham one day early in the afternoon as he sat at the entrance of his tent near the sacred oak trees at the shrine of Shechem. Abraham looked up and saw three strangers coming toward him. He recognized them as important visitors. He ran to meet them and bowed low in front of them.

As was the custom in those days Abraham said to the strangers, "Gentlemen, come in, do not pass by my tent without stopping to visit. Let me bring a little water for you so you can wash your feet, and then you can rest yourselves in the shade of the sacred tree. Let me bring some bread so that you may refresh yourselves, and after you have eaten and rested you can continue your journey."

The men agreed to stop and rest. Abraham rushed into the tent to Sarah and said, "Quickly, Sarah, take some of our best flour to make bread for our three guests, knead it and bake it." Then Abraham ran to his herd, and took a young calf and gave it to a servant, who butchered it for the meal. Then he took cheese, milk and the meat that he had prepared and set it before the strangers. Abraham stood by them under the sacred tree while they ate.

One of the men said to Abraham, "Where is your wife Sarah?"

"Over there, in the tent," replied Abraham.

Then one of the men said, "I will come back here in a few months and at that time your wife Sarah shall have a son."

Sarah was listening at the tent entrance out of sight behind Abraham. Sarah was past the age when women can have children and she laughed to herself, saying, "Now that I am old

and my husband is old, do these strangers really think I can get pregnant and have a child?"

The Lord Yahweh said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh and say, 'How can I have a child now that I am old?' Do you think I can't make it happen? At the right time I will return to you and then Sarah shall have a son."

Sarah was afraid of Yahweh so she denied laughing. Yahweh said, "Oh yes, Sarah, don't deny it, you did laugh."

Then the men left and resumed their journey and headed down the road that led toward the city of Sodom, which was a short distance away. Abraham walked down the road with them as they started out on their way.

As he was walking along the road beside Abraham, Lord Yahweh was thinking about Sodom and its coming fate, and he said to himself, "Should I tell Abraham what I am about to do to Sodom, seeing that Abraham shall become father of a great and mighty nation? I suppose I have to tell him what I am about to do because I have chosen him to be the head of a great nation and I am requiring him, his children and his household after him to be obedient to me by being righteous and just."

So the Lord Yahweh said to Abraham as they continued walking together, "I have heard a lot of complaining about the behavior of the people of Sodom and Gomorrah. I must go down and visit them and see whether they have done these awful things I have heard about, because if I don't go there and see for myself I won't know for sure if these stories are true."

So two of the men left Abraham standing there with Lord Yahweh and continued on their journey toward Sodom. Lord Yahweh remained behind because he was still talking with Abraham, who said to Lord Yahweh, "Will you really destroy the

good people of Sodom along with the wicked people? Suppose there are fifty good people in the city, will you destroy the city while there are fifty good people who live there who will also be killed? Surely it is not like you to kill the good people along with the evil ones, so that the fate of the good is just the same as the fate of the evil people? If you are the judge, shouldn't you do what is just? Everyone knows that it is not fair that good people suffer the same fate as evil people!"

Then Lord Yahweh said, "OK, Abraham. If I find fifty good people in the city, I will forgive the whole place for the sake of the good people."

Abraham was fearful of annoying the Lord Yahweh, but he said, "Lord Yahweh, let's suppose when you count the good people you are five people short of the fifty? Will you then destroy the whole city for lack of five?"

Lord Yahweh said, "No, I will not destroy it if I find forty-five there."

Abraham asked, "Suppose only forty are found there?"

"No, Abraham, for the sake of forty I will not destroy it."

"Lord Yahweh," said Abraham, "don't be angry with me, but how about if there are just 30 good people in the city?"

So Abraham went back and forth negotiating how many good people had to be found to save the city from destruction. They finally agreed on ten—if Yahweh could find ten good people in the city of Sodom he would not destroy it. After they concluded their negotiations the Lord Yahweh continued his trip down the road, and Abraham returned to his tent.

A few days later two strangers (who were actually messengers from the Lord Yahweh) came to Sodom in the evening. Lot was sitting near the entrance gate of the city. When Lot saw the strangers, he rose to meet them and bowed to them and, following the custom of his day to welcome strangers to his home, said to them, "Please, sirs, come to my house to spend the night and wash your feet, and then you can rise early and go on your way."

The strangers said, "No; we will spend the night in the town square."

But Lot urged them strongly to accept his invitation, so they finally accepted and came with Lot to his house, where Lot made them a feast, and baked unleavened bread, and they ate. Later that night before they went to bed, there was a commotion outside Lot's house and all the men of the city of Sodom, all the men and boys of city, every one of them, surrounded the house. They shouted to Lot, "Where are the men who came to your house tonight? Bring them out to us, so that we may have sex with them."

Lot went outside to talk to the men and shut the door, and said to the men of the city, "I beg you, my neighbors, do not do this. Don't molest these men. I have given them protection in my house under the laws of hospitality and they have shelter and protection under my roof. I have two daughters who are virgins; let me bring them out for you and you can do whatever you want to them, but please leave my guests alone."

The men of the city became angry and shouted to Lot, "Get out of our way. You came here as a foreigner in our town and you now think you can judge us and tell us what to do? Let us in so we can seize the young men or we will do to you what we are going to do with your guests, only worse. "

The men of the town surged forward and tried to push Lot away from the door and were ready to break down the door with force when the strangers reached out and grabbed Lot, dragged him inside the house and slammed the door. Then the strangers blinded the men of the town so that they could not see the door.

The two messengers from Lord Yahweh said to Lot, "Who else is in the house with you? Quickly get your family together, sons-in-law, sons, daughters, or any of your relatives and members of your household who are in the city. You and your family have to get out of here. We are going to destroy this city in the morning because the Lord Yahweh has heard the complaints about the behavior of the people of this city and he has sent us to destroy it."

So Lot went out into the night to the homes of his relatives and said to his sons-in-law, who were intending to marry his daughters, "Get up quickly, we have to leave right now because the Lord Yahweh is about to destroy this city." His sons in law did not take him seriously. They laughed and would not get up.

When morning dawned the messengers of Lord Yahweh urged Lot to go immediately. They said to Lot, "You must leave now. Take your wife and your two daughters and go now or else you will be consumed in the punishment of the city." But Lot was reluctant to leave, so the men grabbed him and his wife and his two daughters by the hand and brought them outside the city gates and then left Lot there with his family with a final warning: "Flee for your lives; do not look back or stop anywhere in the plain; flee to the hills or else you will be consumed by fire."

Lot said to the strangers, "My friends, you have shown me great kindness in saving my life; but I cannot flee to the hills, for I am afraid that I cannot run fast enough and the disaster will

overtake me and I will die. There is a small city just over there, just a short distance away, close enough that I can get to it. You can see that it is small. Please let us go there to be safe."

So the messenger of Lord Yahweh said to him, "Very well, I will grant you this favor too, and I will not destroy that city. Hurry up, go there quickly, for I can't start the destruction of Sodom until you arrive there."

That small city was called Zoar. The sun had just risen when Lot arrived at Zoar. Just as Lot arrived at the gate of the city of Zoar the Lord Yahweh rained fire from the sky on Sodom and Gomorrah, and the cities were destroyed in the flames and all the residents of the cities were killed and their crops were destroyed.

But Lot's wife, who was following behind him, looked back, and instantly she became a pillar of salt.

Early that morning Abraham went back to the place where he had the conversation with the Lord Yahweh about the destruction of Sodom, and he looked across the valley toward Sodom and Gomorrah and toward all the lands of the Plain and he saw smoke rising into the air like the smoke of a furnace.

A few days later Lot left the city of Zoar and settled in the hill country nearby with his two daughters, for he was afraid to stay in Zoar, so close to the cities the Lord Yahweh had destroyed. Lot lived in a cave in the hills with his two daughters.

Lot was old, his wife was dead, and his daughters were unmarried, their future husbands killed in the fiery destruction of Sodom. So the older daughter said to the younger, "Our father is old, we are single, there are no men around to marry us and give us children. So let's give our father wine and get him drunk, then we will get into bed with him and have sex, and we

will become pregnant so that we will have children to take care of us in our old age.”

The younger sister agreed. So that night they got their father drunk. The elder daughter got into bed with her father after he was asleep and had sex with him although he was not aware of it.

The next day the sisters got their father drunk again, and this time the younger daughter got into bed with her father and also had sex with him.

Both daughters of Lot became pregnant by their father. The older daughter bore a son and named him Moab and he became the ancestor of the Moabites. The younger daughter also bore a son and named him Ben-ammi and he became the ancestor of the Ammonites.

The first part of this story, the destruction of Sodom for its evil ways, begs the question of the specific nature of the sin for which Sodom was destroyed. Some have argued that the sin was not homosexuality, that it was really about violating the sacred law of hospitality, a desert tradition that in the dangerous climate of the desert a stranger must be taken in, given water and food and a place to sleep, and defended with one's life while he was under the protection of the house owner. That was a sacred duty and the seriousness of that duty is confirmed by Lot's willingness to surrender his virgin daughters to the crowd if it would protect the stranger.

However that can't be the whole story, because Yahweh had decided to destroy the city even before the laws of hospitality were broken.

An alternative argument could be made that the story portrays the conflict of values between urban life and values and the simpler life style of country people and desert nomads. From the perspective of a nomad, cities involved all sorts of evil that justifies their destruction.

The second part of the story appears to be about incest, but it would be better understood as a way of explaining the questionable origins of two neighboring groups that the Hebrews fought and despised, the Moabites and the Ammonites. It was a way of insulting the ancestors of people with whom they fought regular battles.

LORD YAHWEH DEMANDS HUMAN SACRIFICE

The Lord Yahweh did as he had promised—Sarah soon conceived and gave birth to a son that Abraham named Isaac. Abraham circumcised Isaac when he was eight days old, as Yahweh had told him to do with all males in his household.

Abraham was now a hundred years old and Sarah, who was almost as old as Abraham, proclaimed, "I am happy. Yahweh has brought me happiness in my old age. Now everyone who hears about me giving birth at my age will laugh with me instead of laughing at me. Who would have ever thought that Sarah would nurse children in her old age—but I have borne Abraham a son."

The child grew and was weaned and no longer suckled at his mother's breast. Abraham made a great feast for his household on the day that Isaac was weaned. Sarah saw Ishmael, Abraham's son born to the slave Hagar the Egyptian, playing with her son Isaac, so she said to Abraham, "You must throw this slave woman and her son out of our house, because I do not want the son of this slave to inherit along with my son Isaac."

Sarah's demand to kick Hagar and Ishmael out of his house distressed Abraham, but Yahweh came to Abraham to calm him down and told him, "Do not be distressed over Ishmael and your slave woman; whatever Sarah says to you, do as she tells you, for it is through Isaac that your offspring will inherit your name. As for Ishmael, the son of the slave woman, I will make a nation of him also, because he is your offspring."

Early the next morning Abraham took bread and a goat skin bag of water and gave it to Hagar, putting it on her shoulder, along with the child, and sent her away. Hagar wandered off into the desert wilderness. When the water in the goat skin bag was used up she placed the child under one of the bushes and then she

sat down a good way off, about the distance an arrow can fly, thinking to herself, "I don't want to look on the death of the child," and she began to cry.

Yahweh heard the cries of Ishmael and Hagar. The messenger of Yahweh called to Hagar from the sky and said to her, "What troubles you, Hagar? Do not be afraid. Yahweh has heard the crying of Ishmael from the bushes where you put him. Go pick up the boy and hold him tightly by the hand, because I am going to make a great nation of him."

Then Yahweh caused a well of water to appear in front of her. She filled the goat skin bag with water and gave Ishmael a drink.

Yahweh watched over the boy and protected him. Ishmael grew up in the wilderness of Paran. He learned to live in the wilderness and he became an expert with the bow. His mother got a wife for him from Egypt, her homeland.

At about that time King Abimelech, together with the commander of his army, went to Abraham and said to him, "I have noticed that your god Yahweh is with you in all that you do. I want a peace treaty with you. I want you to swear to me, right here in the presence of your god Yahweh, that you will not lie to me or betray me or deceive me or my people or my descendants. I have been loyal to you and treated you fairly, and I expect you will deal with me the same way."

Abraham said, "I swear it." Then he complained to Abimelech that the king's workers had seized a well belonging to Abraham.

Abimelech told Abraham, "I do not know who has done this. You never mentioned it before and I did not hear about it until just now."

Then Abraham took sheep and oxen and gave them to King Abimelech and the two men made a formal agreement. Abraham set apart seven lambs from his flock. King Abimelech asked Abraham, "Why did you separate those lambs from the flock?"

Abraham told the King, "You must accept these lambs from me so that our contract is valid and so you can be my witness that I dug this well." After they sealed their contract with the gift of lambs, King Abimelech and the commander of his army left and went home to the land of the Philistines. Abraham resided as a foreigner for many days in the land of the Philistines.

Yahweh decided to test whether Abraham would keep the agreement he made with him. He called out to him, "Abraham!"

Abraham replied, "I'm right here!"

Yahweh said, "Take your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to Mount Moriah and when you get there I want you to sacrifice him there as a burnt offering to me."

Without protest or argument Abraham rose early the next morning, saddled his donkey, took two of his young servants with him and his son Isaac, cut the wood for the burnt offering and then set out toward the mountains in the distance just as Yahweh had ordered him. On the third day Abraham saw Mount Moriah in the distance, so he camped there and said to his young servants, "Stay here with the donkey; the boy and I will go to the mountain and after we have made the offering we will come back to you."

Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering and handed it to his son Isaac to carry. Abraham carried the fire and the knife. The two of them, father and son, walked along together toward Mount Moriah. Isaac said to his father Abraham, "Father!"

"Yes, my son?" asked Abraham.

Isaac asked him, puzzled, "The fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?"

Abraham answered, "Yahweh himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering, my son." So the two of them walked on together. When they came to the place on the mountain that Yahweh had described to him, Abraham built an altar and laid the wood on it. Then he tied up Isaac and laid him on the altar on top of the wood. As Abraham raised the knife to kill his son the messenger of the Lord Yahweh called to him from the sky and said, "Abraham! Do not kill the boy or do anything to harm him. Now I know that you will obey me and keep our agreement, since you were willing to kill your son for me."

After Yahweh spoke, Abraham looked up and saw a ram, caught by its horns in a nearby clump of bushes. Abraham took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son. So Abraham called that place *The Lord Yahweh Will Provide* and it is still called that to this day.

Then the messenger of the Lord Yahweh called to Abraham a second time from the sky, and said, "The Lord Yahweh has made a promise and wants me to tell you about it. Here is the message from Lord Yahweh: 'Because you were willing to sacrifice your own son to me and offer him as a burnt offering to me, you have demonstrated your loyalty, and I confirm that I will indeed bless you and will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. You and your offspring will have my help in conquering all your enemies and your offspring shall occupy the lands of their enemies because you obeyed my instructions.'"

Abraham and Isaac came down from the mountain and joined the servants, who were waiting for them at the camp below and together they went back to Beersheba, where Abraham lived.

Sarah's annoyance with Hagar is understandable, but throwing her out of the house violated tribal custom that secondary wives had certain rights. That is why Abraham was upset and why Yahweh intervened and promised Ishmael rights of inheritance as well.

The contract between Abraham and King Abimelech was typical—gifts had to be given and received for the contract to be valid. We have the same principle in contracts today—each party to the contract has to both give something and get something in return, even if it is only \$1, to make a contract valid.

The sacredness of an agreement, that once your word was given you were obligated to perform as agreed, is what underlies the demand for the sacrifice of Isaac. Yahweh wanted to see if Abraham would keep his word to do whatever Yahweh commanded him. Abraham was not surprised at Yahweh's demand for human sacrifice because it was not that unusual in that time.

THE WIFE WHO ARRIVED BY CAMEL

Sarah was quite old when she died at Hebron. Abraham was sad and he cried for a while over her body—but then he got up from beside his dead wife and said to his neighbors the Hittites, "I am a stranger and a foreigner residing among you; please, I need some of your land for a burial place, so that I can bury Sarah someplace where I cannot see her grave."

The Hittites answered Abraham, "Listen, my lord; foreigner or not, you are an important person living among us. You can bury Sarah wherever you want. None of us will withhold from you any of our land for burying your dead wife."

Abraham bowed in gratitude to the Hittites, and said, "If you are willing that I bury my dead Sarah where I cannot see her grave, please ask your countryman Ephron if he will provide me with the cave of Machpelah, which he owns, which is at the end of his field. I promise in your presence that I will pay full price for the land."

Ephron the Hittite had been sitting among the Hittites and he answered Abraham in the hearing of his countrymen, "No, my lord Abraham, hear me. I give you the field and I give you the cave at the end of the field, I give it all to you, with my people here as witnesses."

Abraham bowed down before the Hittites and he said to Ephron so that everyone could hear him, "Please listen to me! I want to pay for the field; you must accept payment from me to confirm the agreement that I may possess your land and bury my dead there."

Ephron answered Abraham, "My lord, that piece of land is worth four hundred shekels of silver—what is that between you and

me? OK, if you insist I will accept the payment. Take the land and bury your dead."

Abraham weighed out the payment amount, four hundred shekels of silver, according to the weights current among the merchants. So the field of Ephron together with the cave and all the trees that were in the field, throughout the whole area, became the property of Abraham, and Abraham buried Sarah in the cave.

Abraham was now pretty old. He called his long time servant to him, the man in charge of the day to day management of his household, and said to him, "Put your hand under my thigh and swear an oath to Lord Yahweh, the god of the skies and the earth, that you will not let Isaac marry any Canaanite woman. Promise me that you will go to Haran, to my country and to my tribe, to find a wife for my son Isaac."

The servant said to Abraham, "Did you consider that the woman I find for Isaac may not be willing to come back with me on the long journey to your house? If that happens, should I then take your son Isaac back to Haran to meet the woman I chose for him to marry?"

Abraham said to him, "No, see to it that you do not take my son back to my homeland. His place is here. The Lord Yahweh, the god of the sky, who took me from my father's house and from the land of my birth, and who spoke to me and swore to me, 'To your offspring I will give this land,' he will send his messenger ahead of you, and he will help you find a wife for my son from there. But if the woman is not willing to follow you back here, then you will be free from this oath of mine—but you must not take my son back there under any circumstances." So the servant put his hand under the thigh of Abraham his master and swore to him concerning this matter.

The servant took ten of Abraham's camels and all kinds of choice gifts from Abraham to his relatives in Haran, and then he set out on the long journey to Haran. When he arrived at the city it was evening and he made the camels kneel down outside the city by the well of water. It was the time of evening when women go out to draw water for their homes.

The servant prayed, "O Lord Yahweh, god of my master Abraham, please grant me success today and show your love for my master Abraham. I am standing here by the spring of water, and the women of the town are coming out to draw water. I will ask the girls for a drink of water. Let the girl to whom I shall say, 'Please may I have a drink from your water jug,' and who replies, 'Sir, have a drink and while you are drinking I will water your camels'—let her be the one whom you have appointed as wife for Isaac."

Before he had finished speaking, he saw Rebekah, the granddaughter of Nahor, Abraham's brother, coming down the path with her water jar on her shoulder. The girl was very pretty and a virgin. She went down to the spring, filled her jar, and started to leave. Abraham's servant ran to meet her and said, "Please let me sip a little water from your jar."

"Drink, sir," she said, and quickly lowered her jar upon her hand and gave him a drink. When she had finished giving him a drink, she said, "I will draw water for your camels also, until they have finished drinking." So she quickly emptied her jar into the trough and ran again to the well to draw, and she drew water from the well for all his camels.

The servant gazed at her in silence to learn whether or not Yahweh had made his journey successful. When the camels had finished drinking, the servant took a gold nose-ring weighing a half shekel and two bracelets for her arms weighing ten gold

shekels, and gave them to her and said, "Tell me whose daughter you are. Is there room in your father's house for us to spend the night?"

She said to him, "I am the daughter of Bethuel, son of Milcah." She added, "We have plenty of straw and fodder and a place to spend the night."

The servant bowed his head and said, "Thanks to the Lord Yahweh, the god of my master Abraham, who has demonstrated his faithfulness toward my master. Yahweh has led me on the way to the house of my master's relatives."

The girl ran and told her mother's household about these things. Rebekah had a brother whose name was Laban. Laban ran back to the spring to find the servant. As soon as he had seen the nose-ring, and the bracelets on his sister's arms, and when he heard the words of his sister Rebekah telling what the servant had said to her, he went to look for the stranger and he found him where Rebekah had left him, standing by the camels at the spring.

Laban said, "Come with me, Sir, I have prepared the house for you and a place for the camels." So the servant came into the house and Laban unloaded the camels, and gave him straw and fodder for the camels, and water to wash his feet and the feet of the men who were with him. Then food was set before him to eat, but then servant said to his host, "I will not eat until I have told you why I am here."

Laban said, "Speak on."

The servant said, "I am Abraham's servant, who is brother of your grandfather. The Lord Yahweh has greatly blessed my master and he has become wealthy. Yahweh has given him flocks and herds, silver and gold, male and female slaves, camels

and donkeys. Sarah my master's wife bore a son to my master when she was very old. Abraham has given his son Isaac all his possessions and his wealth as his inheritance. My master made me swear, saying, 'You must not let him marry a Canaanite woman; you must go to my father's home city, to my relatives, to find a wife for my son.'

"Today I arrived at the spring, and said, 'O Lord Yahweh, god of Abraham, let the woman who gives me drink and offers water to my camels be the woman that Yahweh has selected to be wife of my master's son.' Before I had finished speaking there was Rebekah coming toward us with her water jar on her shoulder; and she went down to the spring, and drew water. I said to her, 'Please let me drink.' She gave me water to drink and also watered my camels."

Laban thought for a moment and then said, "This marriage decision comes from Lord Yahweh. We have nothing to say about it one way or the other. So take Rebekah and go, and let her be the wife of your master's son Isaac, as the Lord Yahweh has said."

When Abraham's servant heard their words, he bowed low to the ground before the Lord Yahweh. Then he brought out jewelry of silver and of gold, and garments, and gave them to Rebekah. Then he gave a dowry of costly jewelry and ornaments to her brother and to her mother. Then the servant and the men who were with him ate and drank, and they spent the night there. When they rose in the morning, the servant said, "It's time for me to leave. Send me on my way back to my master."

Her brother and her mother said, "Let Rebekah remain here with us a while, at least ten days; after that she may go with you."

The servant said to them, "Do not delay me, since the Lord Yahweh has made my journey successful. Let me go back to my master right away."

They said, "We will call Rebekah and ask her." So they called Rebekah, and said to her, "Are you willing to go now with this man?"

She said, "Yes, I'll go with him."

So they sent Rebekah and her nurse along with Abraham's servant and his men, but before she left her family wished her well and said to her, "May you, our sister, become tens of thousands; may your offspring conquer their enemies." Then Rebekah and her maids rose up, mounted the camels, and went with Abraham's servant.

Meanwhile Isaac had made his home in the Negev Desert. One evening he went out for a walk in the field, and looking up, he saw camels coming. Rebekah looked up and when she saw Isaac, she slipped quickly from the camel, and said to the servant, "Who is the man over there, walking across the field to meet us?"

The servant said, "It is my master, Isaac." So Rebekah took her veil and covered herself.

The servant told Isaac all the things that he had done. Then Isaac brought Rebekah into his mother Sarah's old tent. He took Rebekah and she became his wife. He made love to her. So Isaac was comforted after his mother's death.

Not long after Lot had married Rebekah, Abraham died. His sons Isaac and Ishmael buried him in the cave of Machpelah, in the field of Ephron the Hittite, beside his wife Sarah.

This story reflects authentic traditions of the time. Abraham's tribe was one of several nomadic Hebrew tribes that occupied the grasslands between the Canaanite cities during this early period. They lived in tents and did not own land. Nomadic tribes tended to marry within their tribe, so traveling back to the tribal home is consistent with nomadic practices. Abraham could have buried Sarah anywhere on open land without having to get permission, but he wanted a special place and he wanted clear title to the burial land, which is why he insisted on paying for the land.

"Arranged" marriages were customary and a gift of dowry in exchange for taking the woman from her family home was accepted practice and sealed the marriage contract.

THE RICH FOREIGNER GETS EXPELLED

Canaan was hot, dry and arid. Very little rain fell in the best of years and some years there was no rain at all. Consequently when crops did not grow and there was little grass in the pastures to feed the flocks, which was a pretty common occurrence in Canaan, there was widespread famine and both people and animals starved. One such famine occurred during the days of Isaac.

Isaac was considering moving his flocks south to greener pastures, but the Lord Yahweh appeared to Isaac suddenly one day and told him not to go to Egypt, as his father Abraham had done, but instead to go to the Philistine city of Gerar and reside there as an undocumented alien. Yahweh told Isaac: "If you remain at Gerar and settle there, I will give you Gerar and all the surrounding land. Even though you are a foreigner and an alien, I will give you and your descendants all the lands as far as the eye can see. I will make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and all the nations of the earth shall speak well of you."

So Isaac went to the city of Gerar with his wife Rebekah and settled there as an alien among the Philistines. When the men of Gerar asked him about his wife, Isaac told them that Rebekah was his sister. He was afraid to tell them that Rebekah was his wife because he thought to himself, "If I tell the men of Gerar that Rebekah is my wife they might kill me so they can have Rebekah for themselves because she is very pretty."

King Abimelech had noticed that Rebekah was quite attractive and had been keeping his eye on her. One day Abimelech looked out of a window of a nearby house and saw Isaac fondling Rebekah. Abimelech became angry and sent for Isaac,

and said, "So now we find out that Rebekah is your wife! Why did you tell us she was your sister?"

Isaac said to him, "Because I thought I might be killed because of her."

Abimelech said, "What were you thinking? One of the men of the city might easily have had sex with your wife without knowing she was your wife, and you would have brought guilt and punishment on us all."

Abimelech immediately sent out word to all the people of the town, telling them, "Whoever touches this man or his wife shall be put to death."

Isaac became a farmer and planted crops, and he had a very successful first year with a crop yield of 100 bushels for each bushel of seed that he planted. The Lord Yahweh was good to him, and Isaac became rich, prospering more and more until he became very wealthy, with vast possessions of flocks and herds, and a great many servants and members of his household, so that the Philistines became jealous of him.

The Philistines were unhappy that the rich foreigner was living among them so King Abimelech finally said to Isaac, "You have to leave our city. Your wealth is causing problems with my people. You have become too rich and powerful for us." So the King expelled Isaac and his household from the city of Gerar.

Isaac left the city and set up his tents in the valley below the city at Gerar, the same place that his father Abraham had lived many years before, and intended to make his home there.

This was not the first time that the Philistines had rejected a foreigner who had done well. Years before when Abraham had gotten wealthy the Philistines were jealous of him and stopped

up his wells by filling them with dirt. So Isaac cleaned out the old wells and dug new wells.

Whenever Isaac's servants dug a well in the valley and found fresh spring water, the herdsmen of Gerar quarreled with Isaac's herders, saying, "The water is ours." So Isaac's workers went a bit farther out into the valley and dug another well, and the herdsmen of Gerar quarreled with them over that well also.

Finally Isaac moved a long distance down the valley far from Gerar and dug another well, and it was far enough away so the herdsmen of Gerar did not fight over it. Isaac called the place where they dug the well "Rehoboth," because he concluded that Yahweh had led them to a new home where they could be happy and prosperous.

A few days later Isaac left Rehoboth and went to Beersheba. That night the Lord Yahweh appeared to him in a dream and said to him: "I am the God of your father Abraham; do not be afraid, for I am with you and will make you prosper, and I will make your offspring numerous." When Isaac woke up the next morning he built an altar there, and set up his camp, and his servants dug another well.

King Abimelech had been keeping track of Isaac, and as soon as Isaac set up his new home at Beersheba the King, accompanied by his political advisor and by the commander of his army, went to see Isaac.

Isaac said to the King, "Why did you come here? Since you didn't want me around and expelled me from your city, what do you want?"

Abimelech said, "Isaac, we see that your god, the Lord Yahweh, has been protecting you and making you rich and successful. We do not want to anger your god, so we have come to ask for a

treaty of peace between us. We have not harmed you. Let us swear an oath between us that we will do no harm to each other. You will do us no harm, just as we have not touched you and have done to you nothing but good and have sent you away in peace, since you are under the protection of Lord Yahweh.”

Isaac agreed and to celebrate their agreement he made a feast for everyone and together they ate and drank. In the morning Isaac and Abimelech rose early and exchanged oaths of peace, and then Isaac set the King and his companions on their way and they departed from Isaac in peace and friendship.

Abraham and his sons are called *aliens* or *foreigners*, who camped in tents rather than in the cities, and this seems to reflect a conscious memory of Hebrew ancestors that they were outsiders, camping in the lands around the cities and frequently in conflict with the city dwellers over land and water rights.

Three times (twice with Abraham, once with Isaac) we come across a story in which a tribal leader passed off his wife as his sister so that he would not be killed. A wife was considered property, and sleeping with a man's wife was a serious offense against the man—but if the husband was killed, the widow was available for whoever wanted her, so we conclude that violation of property rights was a more serious crime than murder.

The concept of “collective punishment” against a group of people (a city or a tribe) for the sins of a member of the group was common—if one person committed a serious crime, the group could be punished by the gods for that crime. The king’s “protection order” for Isaac and Rebekah was to prevent any action by his people that could bring the anger of Isaac's god against the city.

JACOB CHEATS HIS BROTHER

Rebekah desperately wanted a child but was not able to get pregnant. Isaac wanted a son and pleaded with Lord Yahweh to let her conceive. The Lord Yahweh finally granted his request and Rebekah became pregnant with twin boys.

Rebekah was annoyed that the boys struggled and fought with each other in her womb and Rebekah said to herself, if this is the way it is to be with my boys, my life is not worth living. So she went to see Lord Yahweh to ask him about her unusual pregnancy.

The Lord Yahweh told her, "Two nations are in your womb, and two nations will be born to you and they shall struggle against each other. One shall be stronger than the other and the elder will become servant to the younger."

When the time came Rebekah gave birth to twins. The first came out red, his body covered with hair, so they named him Esau. Afterward his younger brother was born with his hand gripping Esau's heel and so he was named Jacob. Esau grew up to become a skillful hunter, a rough man of the field and woods, while Jacob was reserved and more comfortable living quietly at home. Isaac loved Esau more than he loved Jacob, because Esau was a hunter and Isaac loved the wild game he brought home from his hunting. On the other hand, Rebekah's favorite son was Jacob.

One time when Jacob was cooking a stew, Esau came in from a long hunting trip. He had been in the field quite a long time and he was very hungry. Esau said to Jacob, "Let me eat some of that stew you are cooking, for I am almost dead with hunger!"

Jacob said, "Before I give you food to eat you must sell me your birthright as firstborn son."

Esau said, "Alright, I will, I am about to die of hunger so what good are the rights of the eldest son doing for me?"

So Jacob said, "Swear to me first." So Esau swore an oath and sold his birthright to Jacob. In return Jacob gave Esau bread and lentil stew, and so Esau ate and drank, then rose and went his way. He cared very little for his birthright.

Many years later when Isaac was old and his eyes were dim so that he could not see and was almost blind, he called his elder son Esau and said to him, "My son."

Esau answered, "Here I am, father."

Isaac said, "You can see that I am old. I am close to death. Please do me one last favor, take your weapons, your quiver and your bow, and go out to the field, and hunt wild game for me. Then prepare a spicy dish such as I like, and bring it to me to eat, and then I will grant you my blessing before I die."

Rebekah was nearby listening when Isaac spoke to his son Esau. So when Esau went to the field to hunt for game and bring it, Rebekah said to her son Jacob, "I heard your father say to your brother Esau, 'Go hunting, bring me wild game, and prepare for me spicy food to eat, and I will pronounce my blessing of you in front of the Lord Yahweh before I die.' So, my son, here is what you must do. Do exactly what I tell you. Go to the flock and get me two choice baby goats. I will use them to prepare spicy food for your father, such as he likes. You will take the food to your father to eat, and he will think you are Esau and he will pronounce the blessing on you rather than Esau before he dies."

Jacob said to his mother Rebekah, "That won't work, my brother Esau is a hairy man and I am a man of smooth skin. Perhaps my father will feel me and I shall appear to be making a fool of him and that will bring a curse on me and not a blessing."

His mother said to him, "Any curse will be on me, my son; just do what I told you, go and get the goats for me."

So Jacob went and got the goats and brought them to his mother; and his mother prepared the spicy food that his father loved. Then Rebekah took the best garments of her elder son Esau, which Esau had left with her in the house, and had Jacob put them on. Rebekah covered Jacob's arms and neck with the hairy skins of the goats. Then she handed the spicy food and the bread that she had prepared to her son Jacob, who went into his father's room and said, "Father!"

Lot said, "Here I am; who are you, my son?"

Jacob said to his father, "I am Esau your firstborn. I have done as you told me; now sit up and eat the spicy game I brought you, so that you may give me the blessing."

But Isaac said to his son, "How is it that you have found game so quickly, my son?"

Jacob answered, "Because the Lord Yahweh, your God, granted me success."

Then Isaac said to Jacob, "Come near, that I may feel you, my son, to know whether you are really my son Esau or not." So Jacob went up to his father Isaac, who felt him and said, "The voice is Jacob's voice, but the hands are the hands of Esau." Isaac did not recognize him because his hands were hairy like his brother Esau's hands.

Isaac asked again, "Are you really my son Esau?"

Jacob answered, "I am."

Isaac was convinced and said, "Bring the meat to me, and after I have eaten I will bless you."

Jacob brought the food to Isaac, and he ate. Then Jacob brought him wine, and he drank. Then Isaac said to him, "Come near and kiss me, my son." So Jacob came near and kissed him; and Isaac smelled the smell of his garments, so Isaac gave Jacob the blessing he intended for Esau, with these words:

The smell of my son is like the smell of a field that the Lord has blessed. May Yahweh give you the dew of heaven, and the richness of the earth, and plenty of grain and wine.

Let many peoples serve you and nations bow down to you.

You will now be master over your brothers, and all your mother's sons will bow down to you.

Everyone who curses you shall be cursed, and may good things come to those who are good to you.

As soon as Isaac had finished giving Jacob the official blessing and Jacob had left his father's room, Esau returned home from his hunting trip. He prepared spicy food as his father had asked and brought it to his father, and said to him, "Sit up, father, and eat your son's game, so that you may bless me."

His father Isaac said to him, "Who are you?"

Esau answered, "You know who I am, I am your firstborn son, Esau."

Isaac trembled violently, and said, "Then who was it that brought me spicy meat that I have just finished eating before you came? Whoever it was I already gave my blessing—and he is now blessed. I can't take back a blessing once the words have been said!"

Esau heard his father's anguished words and he cried out loudly and bitterly, and said to his father, "Give me your blessing also, father!"

Isaac said, "Your brother came deceitfully and he has taken away your blessing."

Esau said, "Jacob was rightly named. First he took away my birthright. Now he has taken away my blessing. Don't you have a blessing for me also?"

Isaac told Esau, "Like I said, it is too late now. The words have been spoken. I have already made him your lord and I have given him all his brothers, including you, as servants, and I have provided him with grain and wine to sustain him. What is left that I can for you, my son? I don't have anything else."

When Esau heard his father's words, he cried.

Then Isaac said to him: "You must go away from here and make your home away from the fertile lands of the earth, and away from the falling dew of the skies. You will live by your sword. You will serve your brother. But eventually you will break loose and will break the yoke from around your neck."

Esau hated Jacob because he had stolen the blessing which was rightfully his, and he said to himself and to his friends, "Soon my father will die and the days of mourning for him will be over and then I will kill Jacob."

Esau's vow to kill Jacob was overheard and reported to Rebekah. She called Jacob and said to him, "Your brother Esau is consoling himself by planning to kill you. So, my son, you must leave here immediately. Go to my brother Laban in Haran and stay there with him for a while, at least until your brother's anger is diminished and he forgets what you did to him; then I will send for you and let you know that it is safe to come back here."

This story explains the enmity and warfare between two related semitic tribes, the descendants of Jacob, the patriarch of Israel, and Esau, the legendary tribal father of the Edomites. It also explains why the descendants of Jacob occupied Canaan when the Edomites were there first (i.e., the firstborn).

Tribal tradition provides that the first born son inherits his father's goods and possessions and becomes the head of the tribe, with his brothers and others in the tribe becoming his "servants" and subject to his control. Later Israelites did not seem troubled by the fact that Jacob inherited the land by cheating his "brother" out of his rightful inheritance.

Nomadic tribesmen believed that an oath, a treaty, or a contract became a sacred obligation that could not be ignored or taken back once the words were spoken because they believed the words of an oath or a blessing had a life and power of their own and could not be withdrawn once the words were spoken.

LABAN CHEATS JACOB

Isaac said to his son, Jacob, "It's time for you to get married, but you may not marry one of the local Canaanite women. Son, go to your grandfather's house at Haran in Mesopotamia and pick out for yourself one of the daughters of Laban, your uncle, to marry, and may you have lots of children to be your descendants. With Lord Yahweh's help, may your sons win control of the land where we are now aliens and outsiders."

So Jacob, following his father's instructions, went to the country of his grandfather in Mesopotamia, seeking a wife from among his cousins, the daughters of his Uncle Laban. Esau heard that his brother had gone to Mesopotamia to hunt for a wife because none of the local Canaanite women were acceptable to his father, so just to annoy his father Esau visited Ishmael (who was the son of Abraham with his Egyptian slave girl), and arranged for one of Ishmael's daughters to be his newest wife, to add to those he already had.

Meanwhile Jacob was traveling the long road to Haran and somewhere along the trail after the sun had set he stopped for the night. He found a rock to use for a pillow and went to sleep. He had a dream. In the dream he saw a ladder reaching from the earth to the sky. The messengers of Yahweh were climbing up and down the ladder, and Yahweh came over to him and said, "I am the Lord Yahweh, the god of your grandfather Abraham and the god of your father Isaac. The land on which you are sleeping I give to you and to your descendants, and your offspring shall be as many as the sands of the earth. You shall spread out from here in all directions, and all the people of the earth shall acknowledge your power. Know that I am with you and will look out for you wherever you go. I will bring you back to this land; for I will not abandon you until I have done what I promised."

Jacob woke from his sleep and said, "Yahweh is here—and I did not know his power extended this far!" Jacob was afraid, and said, "This place terrifies me! This is the home of Yahweh, and this place is the entrance to the sky."

Jacob got up early in the morning and took the stone that he had used for a pillow and set it up on its end as a memorial pillar and poured oil on the top of it. He called that place Bethel, which means "the home of the god." Then Jacob made a sacred promise to Yahweh, saying, "If Yahweh stays with me and keeps me safe on my journey, and gives me bread to eat and clothing to wear, so that I return home to my father's house in safety, then the Lord Yahweh shall be my god also, and this stone, which I have set up for a memorial pillar, shall be remembered as Yahweh's home, and of all the riches you give me I promise to give a 10% payment to you."

Jacob continued on his journey and came to the land of the people of the east. He saw a well in a field and three flocks of sheep lying there beside it. The stone cover on the well was heavy. When all the local flocks gathered at the well, the shepherds would roll away the stone cover from the opening of the well, water the sheep, and then they would put the stone back in its place on the mouth of the well.

Jacob asked the shepherds, "My brothers, where are you from?"

They said, "We are from Haran."

Jacob asked them, "Do you know Laban, son of Nahor?"

They replied, "We do."

Jacob said to them, "Is he well?"

"He is fine," they replied, "and over there is his daughter Rachel, coming to the well with Laban's sheep."

Jacob said, "Look, it is still broad daylight; it is not time for the animals to be brought back from the fields for the evening. Give the sheep some water and then put them in the fields to graze."

The shepherds replied, "We cannot draw water from the well until all the flocks are assembled here. Then we must work together to roll away the stone that covers the well, so we can water the sheep."

While he was talking to the shepherds, Rachel came slowly down the road shepherding her father's sheep. When Jacob saw Rachel with his Uncle Laban's sheep he went up to the well and all by himself he rolled away the stone that covered the well and drew water from the well for Laban's sheep. Then Jacob kissed Rachel and began to cry. He told Rachel that he was her father's relative, his Aunt Rebekah's son. Rachel ran home and told her father.

When Laban heard the news that Rebekah's son Jacob had arrived, he ran to the well to meet him, embraced him and kissed him, and brought Jacob back to his house. Jacob told Laban the story of why he had come to Haran, and Laban said to him, "Surely you are my relative, my bone and my flesh!" Laban offered the hospitality of the household and so Jacob stayed there for a month, helping with the household duties.

Then Laban said to Jacob, "Just because you are my relative does not mean that you should work for me for nothing, so tell me, what do you think your wages should be?" Jacob knew that Laban had two daughters, the elder was Leah and the younger was Rachel. Leah's eyes were lovely and Rachel was graceful and beautiful. Jacob had fallen in love with Rachel, so he said to

Laban, "I will serve you seven years for your younger daughter Rachel."

Laban said, "OK, it's a deal. I would rather give Rachel to you than any other man, so stay here and work with me."

So Jacob served seven years for Rachel and the time went quickly because Jacob was in love. At the end of the seven years Jacob said to Laban, "I fulfilled my pledge to you, so now give me Rachel as my wife so that I can marry her and we can live as husband and wife."

Laban gathered together all the people of the town and held a marriage feast. In the evening, when it was time for Jacob to go to his wife in the marriage bed he had made for her in his tent, Laban took his daughter Leah and brought her to Jacob's tent after it was dark, and Jacob (who did not yet know he had been tricked), slept with her. When morning came, he discovered that it was Leah who was in his bed and who he had slept with.

Jacob was angry and upset, and he ran to Laban and said to him, "What have you done? We had a deal, and I kept my part of the deal. I served you as a worker on your farm for seven years to win Rachel as my wife. Why did you trick me?"

Laban said, "You are not from around here, so you are not familiar with our local customs. I cannot give the younger daughter in marriage before the first one is married—it's just not done. I know you are upset, but there is a solution. Finish out the week sleeping with Leah, then in return for serving me for another seven years I will give you Rachel also.

Jacob did so. He completed the week sleeping with Leah. Then Jacob gave him his daughter Rachel, and Jacob slept with her and he kept his promise to Laban and he worked for Laban for another seven years.

Jacob loved Rachel but he did not love Leah and did not sleep with Leah any longer. When Lord Yahweh saw that Jacob was ignoring Leah, and she was lonely and had no one to make love to her, and she had not become pregnant during the week Jacob spent with her, he caused Leah to become pregnant and she gave birth to a son whom she named Reuben.

Leah said to herself, "Because the Lord Yahweh felt sorry for me and gave me a son, maybe now Jacob will love me." But Jacob still did not love her. She conceived again and bore another son and named him Simeon. Again she thought that because she produced a second son that Jacob would love her and sleep with her, but still Jacob was not interested. She got pregnant again and gave birth to a third son, and once more thought that Jacob would come to her as her husband, but he still was not interested, so she stopped having children.

Rachel was unable to have any children to give to her husband Jacob. She was embarrassed and envied her sister Leah, who had borne children. She said to Jacob, "Make me pregnant or I shall die of shame!"

Jacob became very angry with Rachel and said to her, "Am I Yahweh that I can just make you pregnant? It's not my fault, I am sleeping with you. It is Yahweh who has kept you from becoming pregnant."

Rachel said, "Take my maid Bilhah and sleep with her until she becomes pregnant and bears children for us, and I will take them as mine so I may have children through her."

Bilhah soon conceived and bore Jacob a son and Rachel said, "Yahweh has judged me and made me sterile but he has also heard my voice and given me a son." Rachel named him Dan. Jacob kept sleeping with Bilhah, and she conceived again and bore Jacob a second son, whom she named Naphtali.

When Leah realized that she was not getting pregnant any more, she decided to follow her sister's example, so she brought her maid Zilpah to Jacob to be another wife to him. Zilpah bore Jacob a son and Leah named him Gad. Zilpah bore Jacob a second son and named him Asher.

In the days of wheat harvest Reuben went and found mandrakes in the field, and brought them to his mother Leah. Then Rachel said to her sister Leah, "Please give me some of your son's mandrakes."

Leah said to Rachel, "Is it such a small matter to you that you took away my husband from my bed, that you now have the gall to ask for my son's mandrakes also?"

Rachel said, "I'll make you a deal. If you give me the mandrakes I will have Jacob sleep with you tonight."

The deal having been made, when Jacob came from the field in the evening, Leah went out to meet him, and said, "You must come with me and sleep with me tonight, for I hired you for the evening and paid for you by giving my son's mandrakes to Rachel."

So Jacob slept with her that night. Yahweh listened to Leah's pleading and so Leah conceived and bore Jacob a fifth son and then she bore a sixth son. Leah then concluded to herself, "Yahweh has provided me with a good dowry and now Jacob will respect me because I have borne him six sons."

Then Yahweh thought about Rachel and decided to respond to her appeals by letting her get pregnant. Rachel then conceived and bore a son and named him Joseph.

Jacob was tricked, but the story accurately reflects the traditions of the time that (a) the elder must be married before the younger, and (b) once Jacob slept with her, Leah was his wife. Having multiple wives was acceptable practice, as was the practice of having children with slaves or servants, where the women had status as a second-class wife or a concubine.

Rachel says she'll let Leah have sex with her husband if Leah gives her his son's mandrakes. Mandrake is a narcotic plant related to belladonna that is used both as a pain-killer and as an aphrodisiac and was believed in ancient times to overcome fertility. Here we have our first recorded drug deal for sex! No mention is made as to whether Leah's son Reuben, who found the mandrake plants, was upset that his mother gave away his stash.

JACOB GETS LABAN'S GOAT(S)

Jacob had been in Haran far too long and he was eager to go home, so after his son Joseph was born he went to his uncle Laban and said to him, "It's time for me to leave here and go back to my own country. I've earned the right. I served you for many years. Let me take my wives and my children and let me leave here peacefully, for you know how well and hard I have worked for you these many years."

Laban said to him, "I mean no offense but I have learned from my gods that your god, the Lord Yahweh, has been good to me because of you. I want you to stay here with me—so name your price and I will give you whatever you ask, just as long as you remain here."

Jacob said to him, "Laban, you know I have served you well and you can see how well your flocks and herds have multiplied under my care. You know that you had few cattle and little wealth before I came and you can see how your flocks and herds have increased under my care. Yes, Laban, the Lord Yahweh has been good to you. Now I have to take care of my family and provide for them."

Laban said reluctantly, "What shall I give you when you leave?"

Jacob said, "You don't have to give me anything—except for this one thing. I will take care of your flock again for a little while longer. I want to go home with a flock of my own, so let me go through your flocks of sheep and goats and separate out every speckled and spotted sheep and every black lamb, and the spotted and speckled among the goats—these unwanted sheep and goats shall be my wages. Before I leave here my honesty and integrity will speak for me when you come to inspect the sheep and goats that I am taking with me. I will take just the

ones you agreed shall be my wages. See for yourself that I do not take anything that does not belong to me. Every animal that is not speckled and spotted among the goats and black among the lambs, if found with me, shall be counted stolen."

Laban said, "Good! It's settled, that's the way it will be."

Later that day while Jacob was taking some of Laban's sheep and goats to a nearby pasture Laban went through the rest of his herd of goats and sheep and removed the male goats that were striped and spotted, and all the female goats that were speckled and spotted, and every lamb that was black. He told his sons to take these sheep and goats that he had removed from his flock to fields far away where Jacob could not find them, a distance of about three days journey, so when Jacob went through the herd later he would not find any animals that he could take for his own flock.

Jacob soon discovered what his father in law Laban had done, so to get back at him he cut sapling trees and peeled strips of bark from them, exposing the white of the wood beneath the bark. He set the saplings in front of Laban's sheep and goats as they drank from the troughs where the flocks came to drink. Since they often mated when they came to drink, the sheep and goats that were bred in front of the saplings produced young sheep and goats that were striped, speckled, and spotted. Jacob separated the lambs that were striped, speckled and spotted, or were completely black, from the flock of Laban and kept them separate.

Whenever the strongest and healthiest of the flock were breeding, Jacob put the saplings where the sheep and goats could see them, but when the weaker ones in the flock were drinking at the trough Jacob did not put out the rods. When the sheep and goats had offspring, the stronger ones, that were now

striped, or speckled, or spotted, or black, belonged to Jacob, and the weaker ones, that were all white, belonged to Laban. So Jacob got very rich, and had large flocks, and many male and female slaves, and many camels and donkeys.

Jacob heard a rumor that Laban's sons were complaining that Jacob had taken their father's wealth and his flocks (although they did not know how he had done it) and Jacob began to sense trouble coming. Jacob noticed that Laban was not as friendly as he had been previously. In fact he was getting hostile and Jacob began to fear for his safety. So Lord Yahweh said to Jacob, "You have to get out of here—quickly. It's time to go. Return home. I will go with you and protect you."

Jacob sent word to Rachel and Leah to meet him in the pasture where his flock was, and when his daughters arrived he said them, "I have noticed that your father does not regard me as favorably as he once did. But Lord Yahweh, the god of my father, has been with me. You know I served your father Laban as well as I could, yet your father cheated me and changed my wages ten times, but Yahweh would not permit him to harm me. If Laban said, 'The speckled sheep shall be your wages,' then all the flock was speckled; and if he said, 'The striped sheep shall be your wages,' then all the flock was striped. So Yahweh has taken away the livestock of your father and given them to me."

Jacob continued, "During the mating of the flock I dreamed that the male goats that mated with the female goats were striped, speckled, and mottled. Yahweh's messenger said to me in the dream, 'Jacob,' and I said, 'Here I am!' And he said, 'Notice that all the goats that are mating with the flock are striped, speckled, and mottled. I have seen what Laban has been doing to you and I am paying him back for cheating you. I am Yahweh, the God of Bethel, where you once set up a pillar and made a promise to

me. You must leave this land immediately and return to the land of your birth.' "

Rachel and Leah said to Jacob, "Is there anything left of our father's possessions for us to inherit? Doesn't he treat us as foreigners? He sold us out, and he has been using up the money that should be our inheritance. All the property that Yahweh has taken away from our father belongs to us and to our children. So do what you must do. Obey Lord Yahweh."

Jacob prepared to leave immediately. He set his children and his wives on camels, he packed up everything that he had acquired in Haran, and he drove his flocks and livestock in front of him, and headed toward the home of his father Isaac in the land of Canaan.

Laban had gone to another field to shear his sheep, and while he was out of the house Rachel stole her father's household gods. Jacob did not tell Laban he was leaving but fled quickly with everything he had, crossed the Euphrates River, and headed toward the hill country of Gilead. Three days later Laban found out that Jacob had fled so he took his tribesmen with him and pursued Jacob for seven days until he caught up with him in the hill country of Gilead. Yahweh warned Laban in a dream that night to, "Be careful that you say nothing to Jacob, either good or bad."

Jacob was camping in the hill country and Laban and his tribesmen were camped nearby. In the morning Laban walked over to Jacob's camp and said to Jacob, "What have you done? You have deceived me, and carried away my daughters like captives won in battle. Why did you flee secretly without telling me? I would have sent you away with a feast in friendship and with singing, with the music of the tambourine and lyre. Why did you not give me a chance to kiss my sons and my daughters

farewell? What you have done is foolish. I have enough armed men with me to do you harm; but Yahweh, the God of your father, spoke to me last night, saying, 'Be careful that you say nothing to Jacob, either good nor bad.' I realize you had to go because you longed greatly for your father's house, but why did you steal my household gods?"

Jacob answered Laban, "I left quickly because I was afraid of you, because I thought that you would take your daughters from me by force, but I did not take your gods and if you find your gods with any one of us that person shall not live. In the presence of our kinsfolk as witnesses, point out what I have that is yours, and take it."

Jacob did not know that Rachel had stolen the gods. So Laban went first into Jacob's tent, then into Leah's tent, and then into the tent of the two maids, but he did not find them. He left Leah's tent and entered Rachel's. Rachel had left her tent and had taken the household gods and put them in the camel's saddle and sat on them. Laban felt all about in the tent, but did not find them.

Rachel said to her father, "Don't be angry with me that I cannot rise before you, but I am having my period." So Laban searched, but did not find the household gods.

Then Jacob became angry and scolded Laban. He said to Laban, "What have I done wrong? Why did you hotly pursue me like a criminal? I let you search through all my goods and you have found nothing that belongs to you! If you have a complaint against me make it here before my kinsfolk and your kinsfolk, so that they may decide which of us is right."

'For twenty years I worked with you. I was a good manager of your herds. Your ewes and your female goats have not miscarried while I was in charge of them. I did not even take

animals from your flock to eat. Any of your animals that were in my charge that were killed by wild beasts I made up to you from my own flock and I bore the loss myself. If an animal was stolen, whether in the day or in the night, I made it up to you. I cared for your flocks when the heat consumed me, and when I was cold at night, and when I was unable to sleep. Twenty years I have been in your household, working faithfully for you. I served you fourteen years for your two daughters, and six years for my flock, and you have reduced my wages ten times. If the gods of my ancestors, the god of my father, the *Shield of Abraham*, and the *Fear of Isaac*, had not been on my side, surely now you would have sent me away with nothing. Lord Yahweh saw my troubles and how hard I had worked, and rebuked you last night."

Laban answered Jacob, "The daughters are my daughters, the children are my children, the flocks are my flocks, and all that you see is mine. But what can I do today about these daughters of mine, or about their children whom they have borne? Let us make a covenant of peace between you and me, and let there be a witness here between us."

So Jacob took a stone and set it up as a pillar, and he said to his tribesmen, "Gather stones," and they took stones, and made a pile of stones and then they ate together there by the pile.

Laban said, "This pile of stones is a witness of the agreement we just made. May your god the Lord Yahweh keep his eye on us when we are out of each other's sight. If you mistreat my daughters, or if you take other wives in addition to my daughters, even though no one else knows it, remember that Yahweh is witness to whatever goes on that affects this agreement between us."

Then Laban said to Jacob, "You see this pile of stones, and you see the pillar which we have set up as a witness to our agreement. This is a boundary line between us. I will not pass beyond this heap of stones to do you harm, and you will not pass beyond this pile of stones to do me harm. May the *God of Abraham* and the *God of Nahor* be the guarantors of our promise."

So Jacob swore an oath by the *Fear* of his father Isaac, and offered a sacrifice on nearby high ground and gathered his tribesmen together to eat bread with Laban's tribesmen, and they partied together all night on the hillside. Early the next morning Laban kissed his grandchildren and his daughters and blessed them. Then he departed and returned home.

Abraham, Lot, Isaac, and Jacob are *patronyms*, that is, they are the presumptive ancestors that gave their names to tribes, each of whom played a part in the folk memory of the later combination of tribes that became Israel. Each had a tribal god (such as the *Shield of Abraham*, the *Fear of Isaac*) as protector. Just as the tribes merged to form the Hebrew people, so their tribal gods were merged into the powerful national god *Lord Yahweh*.

Household gods were an important symbol to these nomadic tribal peoples not only because they were symbolic of the protector god of the tribe, but because possession of these household gods represented tribal leadership and the right of inheritance. Whoever possessed them was heir to possessions and power.

A *covenant* is a contract or agreement and could be between gods and people, or among tribes, and it was common to memorialize agreements with an upright pillar, or with a pile of stones, or both, as in this story.

ANNOYING LITTLE BROTHER SOLD AS A SLAVE

Jacob arrived back in the land of Canaan and settled there with his family, his tribesmen and his herds in this land where his father before him had lived as an alien. Jacob had a son named Joseph, his youngest child, now seventeen years old. Jacob loved Joseph more than any of his other children because Jacob was the son of his old age, and so he had made a special robe for Joseph that had sleeves. Joseph worked with his older brothers in the pastures and helped them tend his father's flock of sheep and goats.

One day Joseph reported to his father that his brothers were lazy and not doing a good job caring for the sheep. The brothers hated Joseph and talked rudely to him because he was his father's favorite and because he had gotten them into trouble with their father. Joseph made their hatred even worse when he told them about a dream he had in which he and his brothers were harvesting grain and tying it into bundles (called sheaves). Joseph's sheaf stood upright and his brother's sheaves bowed down to Joseph's sheaf. The brothers found their little brother annoying and insolent because the dream implied that Joseph was going to rule over them. They hated him because of his dreams.

Joseph continued to annoy his brothers with his dreams of ruling over them. Joseph had another dream and told it to his brothers: "In my dream the sun, the moon, and eleven stars were bowing down to me." When he told the dream to his father and his brothers, his father became angry and rebuked him, and said to him, "What kind of insolent dream did you have? Do you think that I and your mother and your brothers will take orders from you and bow to the ground before you as your servants?"

Joseph's brothers continued to be jealous of him and quite angry. One day soon after his brothers had taken the flocks to pastures near Shechem, Jacob said to Joseph, "Your brothers are pasturing the flock at Shechem. I want you to go check on them and see if they need anything, and come back here and let me know."

So Joseph left the valley of Hebron and went Shechem, where a man found him wandering around in the fields and asked him, "What are you looking for?"

"I am looking for my brothers," he said; "tell me, please, where they are pasturing the flock."

The man said, "They have gone away here. I heard them say they were going to Dothan."

So Joseph went after his brothers and found them at Dothan. They saw him coming from a distance and before he got close to them they conspired to kill him. They said to one another, "Here comes the dreamer. Let's kill him and throw him into one of the pits. Then we will tell our father that a wild animal attacked and killed him. So now the dreamer will get what he deserves!"

When Reuben heard his brothers talk of killing Joseph, he objected strongly and got his brothers to abandon the idea. Reuben said to his brothers, "Let us not take his life. We must not shed his blood. Let's just throw him into this pit here in the wilderness, but let's not hurt him." Reuben planned to come back later and rescue Joseph and take him home to his father.

When Joseph caught up to his brothers, they stripped him of his long robe with sleeves and threw him into a deep dry pit. Then they sat down to eat. While they were eating they saw a caravan of Midianite merchants coming from Gilead, with their

camels carrying trade goods and aromatic spices on their way to trade in Egypt.

Judah waited until Reuben had gone off for awhile, then he said to his brothers, "I have an idea. There is no profit in killing our brother but we could make this situation profitable to us. Let's sell him to the Midianites. We don't need to hurt him or kill him—he is our brother, our own flesh." And his brothers agreed.

The brothers then lifted Joseph out of the pit and sold him to the Midianites for twenty pieces of silver, and the Midianites then went on their way and took Joseph to Egypt.

When Reuben returned to the pit and saw that Joseph was not in the pit, he tore his clothes in rage and anger. He returned to his brothers, and said, "The boy is gone and I am responsible for him. What can I do?"

Then the brothers took Joseph's robe, slaughtered a goat, and dipped the robe in the blood. They took the long robe with sleeves to their father and they said, "We found this robe on the trail. Is this your son Joseph's robe?"

Jacob recognized it and said, "Yes, it is my son's robe! A wild animal must have devoured him. No doubt Joseph was torn to pieces." Then Jacob ripped his clothes and put on rough burlap as underwear, and mourned for his son for many days. His sons and daughters tried to comfort him but he refused to be comforted, and said, "No, I shall go down to the underworld of the dead still mourning my son."

Meanwhile the Midianites had arrived in Egypt and sold Joseph to Potiphar, one of Pharaoh's high officials, the captain of Pharaoh's palace guard.

Joseph was put to work in Potiphar's household, and he did a good job and was successful at whatever he did. Potiphar soon noticed Joseph's success at whatever he did and attributed it to the fact that Joseph's god, the Lord Yahweh, was helping him so Potiphar made Joseph the overseer of his house and put him in charge of all that he had. With Joseph in charge Potiphar didn't have to worry about anything—except for the food that he ate.

Joseph was a handsome man and women noticed him. Potiphar's wife was attracted to Joseph and said to him one day, "I want you to sleep with me." Joseph refused. He told her, "Look, lady, with me in charge my master has no concern about anything in the house and he has put everything that he owns in my hands. He trusts me. No one has more authority in this house than I do. Potiphar has not kept anything from me except you, because you are his wife. How could I do this great offense against him and against my god the Lord Yahweh?"

Day after day she kept asking Joseph to sleep with her. He continued to refuse. One day when he entered the house to do his work, as he did every day, there was no one else home but Potiphar's wife. She grabbed him by his clothes and again asked Joseph to sleep with her. He refused again and ran out of the house, but she was still holding on to his clothes, and his clothing came off as he ran outside.

When the wife saw that she was still holding his garment in her hand and Joseph had fled outside without his cloak, she called out to the members of her household and said to them, "Look what just happened. My husband has brought a Hebrew into our house to insult us! He just came in to my house and tried to rape me, and I screamed. When I refused him and screamed, he left his clothes in my hands and fled outside."

She kept Joseph's clothes with her until Potiphar came home, and she told Potiphar the same story she had already told members of the household. She told Potiphar, "That Hebrew servant you brought into our house tried to rape me, but as soon as I screamed, he left his clothes beside me and ran away."

When Potiphar heard the story his wife told him he became enraged. He had Joseph arrested and put him into the same prison where the Pharaoh's prisoners were confined and there he remained.

The Lord Yahweh continued to support Joseph while he was in prison and caused the chief jailer to like and trust him, so the chief jailer made Joseph a "trustee" and put him in charge of all the prisoners. The chief jailer knew his reputation and had confidence in Joseph and did not worry about what was going on in the prison. The Lord Yahweh made everything that Joseph did work out well.

The story reflects (a) ongoing tension and conflict between the tribes (sons) of Jacob (Israel) that were closely related and eventually formed the Kingdom of Israel, and (b) the historical fact that a series of nomadic tribes (collectively known as the *Habiru*, from which we get the word *Hebrew*) settled in the delta area of Egypt during this period and many had worked their way into leadership positions.

SEX IN THE CITY

Judah decided to leave his father and brothers and head off on his own. He settled some distance away near the home of a man named Hirah and made a home for himself there.

He married a young Canaanite woman and shortly after they slept together in the marriage bed she conceived and bore three sons in quick succession. The eldest son was named Er. Judah chose a young woman named Tamar to be husband to Er, but Judah did some things that Lord Yahweh thought were terribly evil so the Lord Yahweh killed Er.

Judah then went to his second son, Onan, and said to him, "Onan, your brotherly duty is to sleep with Tamar, so that she will produce children for your brother."

Onan was not happy with what tribal custom required him to do, and since Onan knew that the children that he fathered with Tamar would not be his, whenever he went to bed with his brother's wife he pulled out from her before he ejaculated and he spilled his semen on the ground so that he would not give offspring to his brother. That angered the Lord Yahweh, so he put Onan to death also.

Frustrated that Tamar had not produced children for Er, Judah instructed his daughter-in-law Tamar, to go home to her father's house and remain there as a widow until the youngest son and brother grew up and was old enough to marry her. So Tamar went to live in her father's house. She waited. And waited. Judah's youngest son Shelah was now grown, yet Judah had not brought Shelah to her for marriage.

In course of time Judah's wife died. After the required time of mourning for his wife was over Judah and his friend Hirah, who

was still his neighbor, went on a journey to the village of Timnah, where the sheepshearers lived, because Judah wanted to have his sheep sheared. When Tamar heard that her father-in-law was headed to Timnah to shear his sheep and realizing that Judah was now out of mourning for his wife and could be seduced, she took off her widow's clothes, put on a veil, wrapped herself in a shawl and sat down at the entrance of a small town along the road to Timnah.

When Judah saw her sitting there he did not recognize Tamar because she had covered her face with a veil and he assumed she was a local prostitute. He went over to her as she sat by the roadside and said to her, "Come with me, I want to have sex with you."

She said, "What will you pay me to have sex with me?"

Judah answered, "I will send you a young goat from my flock."

Tamar said, "If you aren't going to pay me now, you will have to give me something valuable to keep as security until you send my payment."

Judah said to Tamar, "What do you want me to give you?"

She replied, "I will hold your signet ring, the belt that binds your robe, and the staff that is in your hand."

So Judah gave them to her, and they had sex and she got pregnant by him. Then she got up and went back home. She took off her veil and put on the mourning garments of her widowhood.

Judah sent his friend Hirah with the baby goat he had promised to the prostitute and asked Hirah to bring back the items that he had left with the prostitute as security—his ring, his belt and his

walking staff. Hirah could not find the woman. He asked around town, "Where is the temple prostitute who sits by the road into town?"

The people of the town said, "We don't have a prostitute here."

Hirah returned to Judah and said, "I could not find her and the people in the town said that they did not have a temple prostitute in that town."

Judah replied, "Then just let her keep those things of mine as her own, otherwise we will be laughed at. I already sent the young goat, as you know, and we could not find her, so let's just forget about it."

About three months later Judah was told by some friends, "Your daughter-in-law Tamar has been sleeping around. She is a whore. Even worse, she is now pregnant as a result of being a whore."

So Judah said, "Drag her out of her house and burn her to death."

As she was being taken out of her house she sent word to her father-in-law with this message: "It was the owner of these who made me pregnant. Notice, please, who owns the signet ring, and the belt to tie around a robe, and the walking staff."

Then Judah, shocked at seeing his possessions and realizing what had happened, acknowledged that the possessions were his and he said, "She is more in the right than I am, since I did not give her in marriage to my son Shelah, as I had promised."

So Judah got his stuff back and he did not sleep with Tamar again.

Tribal tradition is strong in this story: the father picks the wife for his sons, there is a duty to marry and have children with a dead brother's wife so that he will have offspring and the tribe will have more members, violation of tribal duty results in death, which was not an uncommon punishment.

We get the term *onanism* [pulling out of sexual intercourse just before ejaculation] from this story, but contrary to some misinterpretations of this story, Onan's trouble with Yahweh was not because he pulled out of intercourse before ejaculation or because he wasted the semen, but because he did not do his duty to father children for his dead brother as was required by the customs of the time.

DREAMS OF LIFE AND DEATH

While Joseph was in prison in Egypt allegedly for sexual assault against the wife of his master, two high officials of the Pharaoh's household, his wine steward and his chief baker, got into serious trouble with the Pharaoh of Egypt and he had them put into the same prison where Joseph was confined. The captain of the guard put Joseph in charge of these two new prisoners, who were locked up in the prison with long sentences.

One night both the wine steward and the baker had dreams that troubled them. When Joseph saw them in the morning, he noticed that they were troubled, so he asked them, "Why are you so upset today?"

They replied, "We have had dreams and no one can tell us what they mean."

Joseph said to them, "Dreams come from the gods and so does their interpretation. Please tell me your dreams. I will see if I can tell what they mean."

First the wine steward told his dream to Joseph, and said to him, "In my dream there was a vine in front of me and on the vine there were three branches. There were buds on the branches and as soon as it budded, its blossoms came out and the clusters ripened into grapes. Pharaoh's cup was in my hand. I took a bunch of grapes and squeezed the juice into Pharaoh's cup and gave the cup to Pharaoh."

Joseph told the wine steward, "Here's what the dream means: the three branches are three days—within three days Pharaoh will let you out of prison and will give you back your job as his cupbearer. Once again you will hand Pharaoh his wine cup just as you used to do when you were his wine steward before you

were put in prison. I have interpreted your dream and given you good news. Please don't forget about me when you get out of here. Do me the kindness to mention me to Pharaoh and help me get of this prison. For the truth is, I was stolen from my home in the land of the Hebrews and I have done nothing to justify putting me into this dungeon."

When the chief baker saw that the interpretation of the wine steward's dream was good news, he said to Joseph, "I had a dream that there were three baskets of bread on my head. In the top basket there were all sorts of baked foods for Pharaoh, but the birds were eating the food out of the basket on my head."

Joseph told him, "Unfortunately I have bad news for you. This is what your dream means: the three baskets are three days. Within three days Pharaoh will hang you and the birds will eat the flesh from your body while you are hanging."

Three days later, on his birthday, Pharaoh hosted a festival dinner for all the members of his household, his friends and his servants, and he brought the wine steward and the chief baker out of prison to join the party. During the dinner Pharaoh announced that he had restored the wine steward to his position just as it had been before the steward had been imprisoned. Then he issued orders that the chief baker be hanged, just as Joseph had told him would happen.

Once he got out of prison the wine steward forgot about his promise to tell Pharaoh about Joseph.

Two years passed. Pharaoh dreamed that he was standing by the Nile, and in his dream he saw seven sleek and fat cows come up out of the Nile and graze in the grass beside the river. Then seven other cows, ugly and thin, came up out of the Nile after them and stood by the fat cows on the bank of the Nile. The ugly

thin cows ate up the seven sleek and fat cows. Then Pharaoh awoke. He lay awake for a while contemplating the meaning of the dreams, and then he fell asleep again and had another dream.

In his second dream seven ears of grain, plump and well-formed, were growing on one stalk. Then seven ears of corn, thin and blighted by the east wind, sprouted after them. The thin ears swallowed up the seven plump and full ears. Pharaoh awoke frightened but then realized it was a dream.

In the morning he was very troubled by the dreams. He sent messengers out to gather all of Egypt's magicians and wise men and bring them to him. Pharaoh told them his dreams, but there was no one who could interpret the dreams for Pharaoh.

The wine steward remembered Joseph and said to Pharaoh, "I just remembered something I should have told you a long time ago. Remember a few years ago when you were angry with me and with the chief baker and you put us into prison. Both of us had troubling dreams while we were in the prison and a young Hebrew was there with us in prison, a servant of the captain of the guard. We told the Hebrew our dreams and he interpreted them for us. The dreams turned out just as he said. I was restored to my office and the baker was hanged."

So Pharaoh sent for Joseph and he was hurriedly brought out of the dungeon. When he had shaved himself and changed his clothes from his prison garments, he came before Pharaoh.

Pharaoh said to Joseph, "I had a dream and no one can explain to me what it means. I was told that when you hear a dream you can interpret it."

Joseph answered Pharaoh, "I do not interpret dreams. They are from the gods, but my god the Lord Yahweh will give me the interpretation of your dreams."

Pharaoh said to Joseph, "In my dream I was standing on the banks of the Nile when seven fat sleek cows came out of the Nile River and fed in the reed grass. Then seven other cows came up after them, poor, very ugly, and thin. Never have I seen such ugly cows anywhere in Egypt. The thin and ugly cows ate up the first seven fat cows, but when they had eaten them no one would have known that they had eaten, for they were still as ugly and thin as before. Then I awoke. I fell asleep a second time and dreamed I saw seven ears of grain, full and good, growing on one stalk. Seven ears of corn, withered, thin, and blighted by the east wind, sprouted after them and the thin ears swallowed up the seven good ears. I told my dreams to the magicians and wise men but none of them could explain it."

Then Joseph said to Pharaoh, "Both your dreams have the same meaning. The Lord Yahweh is telling you what he is about to do. The seven good cows are seven years, and the seven good ears are seven years. The seven lean and ugly cows that came up after them are seven years, as are the seven empty ears blighted by the east wind. They are seven years of famine, in which the people will starve and die."

Joseph continued: "This is what is about to happen. There will be seven years of good crops throughout the land of Egypt, but they will be followed by seven years of famine when those good years will be forgotten and there will be terrible suffering throughout the whole area. The two dreams with the same message mean that Lord Yahweh is serious about this and it will happen immediately. So here is what you must do. Select a wise and judicious man and put him in charge of all the land. Give him the authority to act in the name of the Pharaoh. Build

storehouses in the cities. Take 20% of the harvest each year for the next seven years and put it in the storehouses. The grain that is stored away will be a reserve to be used during the following seven years of bad harvests and will keep the people from starving."

Pharaoh and his advisers liked the plan. So Pharaoh said to Joseph, "Since your god Yahweh has shown you all this, you are obviously smarter than my other advisors. I am putting you in charge of the government, you will be my deputy and everyone will have to obey you and do whatever you tell them to do throughout my kingdom. I am the only person who will be greater than you."

Pharaoh removed his signet ring with his royal seal, put it on Joseph's finger and said to him, "From now on you are in charge of all the land of Egypt. All my people must do as you command."

The pharaoh had clothing made of fine linen brought to Joseph so that he was dressed for his position of honor and power, and put a gold chain around his neck. Pharaoh had him ride in the chariot of his second-in-command. Servants ran in front of the chariot and told everyone to bow as he went by. Pharaoh gave Joseph the daughter of the priest of the temple of On as his wife.

Joseph was 30 years old when Pharaoh made him his second in command and gave him authority to do whatever was necessary to store food to prepare for the years of famine. Joseph traveled all over the country of Egypt, getting all the surplus food into newly-built storage facilities in the cities. He stored so much food that it was like the sand of the sea and he stopped measuring the amount of grain that was stored.

Before long the weather changed. It became so hot and dry that the crops withered and died. The days of famine arrived in Egypt. Hungry people called out for grain and bread, but Pharaoh sent them to Joseph and told the people to do whatever Joseph told them to do. Soon the famine was widespread and serious, and Joseph opened all the storehouses and sold grain to the Egyptians. People from all over the world came to Joseph in Egypt to buy grain, because the famine spread and became severe throughout the world.

Throughout the Middle East dreams were believed to be one of the ways that the gods communicated messages to humans. People skilled at providing interpretations of dreams were highly valued and generously rewarded. Even today in our more sophisticated culture there are people who believe in fortune tellers and dreams, and of course there are people who will provide fortune telling and dream interpretation services.

In the early periods of Egyptian history a variety of nomads from the desert descended on Egypt. Often these incursions were peaceful, sometimes they were violent. One group of nomadic desert people who settled on the outskirts of the Nile Valley were known by the Egyptians as *Habiru*, from which the word Hebrew comes. It was not unusual for foreigners in Egypt to earn leadership positions in the government.

Egypt survived as a great nation for several thousand years due at least in part to central planning and vast storehouses for grain that got them—and their neighbors from the desert—through hard times that were inevitable in those years.

JOSEPH GETS HIS REVENGE

There had been no rain in Canaan in several months. The land was dry, the grass had withered and the crops had failed. There was widespread famine and both people and animals were starving.

When Jacob learned that there was grain in Egypt, he said to his sons, "Why do you keep looking at one another helplessly? I have heard," he said, "that there is grain in Egypt; go down and buy grain for us there, that we may live and not die."

Ten of Joseph's brothers went on the long trip down to Egypt to buy grain. Jacob did not send Joseph's brother Benjamin with his other brothers, for he feared that harm might come to the brothers on their journey, and then he would be alone, with no sons left.

Joseph was governor over all the land of Egypt and he was in charge of food sales to the population. When Joseph's brothers arrived in Egypt they went to Joseph and bowed themselves before him with their faces to the ground. Joseph recognized his brothers but he decided not to reveal who he was and so he treated them like strangers and spoke harshly to them. "Where do you come from?" he said.

"From the land of Canaan, to buy food," they replied.

Although Joseph had recognized his brothers, they did not realize that Joseph was their younger brother. Joseph remembered the many dreams that he had about them. He said to them, "You are spies; you have come to see the bareness of the land and how weak we are!"

They said to Joseph, "No, my lord; your servants have come to buy food. We are all sons of one man. We are honest men. We have never been spies."

Joseph said to them, "No, you have come to see the bareness of the land!"

They pleaded with Joseph, "We, your servants, are twelve brothers, the sons of a certain man in the land of Canaan; the youngest, however, remained at home with our father, and one brother is dead."

Joseph said, "As I said, I think you are spies! There is a way that you can prove your story is true. I am going to hold you as hostages here in Egypt until your youngest brother comes here! One of you can go home to your father and bring your brother to me, while the rest of you remain in prison. That way we will see whether you are telling the truth. If your youngest brother does not return here to me we shall know that the rest of you are spies—and you will be treated accordingly."

Joseph put them all in prison for three days. Three days later Joseph had them brought to him and he told them, "If you follow my instructions you will live, for I respect Yahweh, your god. If you are honest men, let one of your brothers stay here as a hostage. The rest of you shall go home with grain to relieve the famine of your households. Then you must return here with your youngest brother. Then I will know you are telling me the truth and you will not die. Reluctantly they agreed to do what Pharaoh demanded.

The brothers talked among themselves and concluded with remorse, "We brought this trouble on ourselves. We are paying the penalty for what we did to our brother. We saw his anguish when he pleaded with us not to put him in the pit, not to sell

him as a slave, but we did not listen. That is why this trouble has come to us—we deserve it."

Reuben said to his brothers, "I told you not to bother the boy, but you would not listen. So now we have to pay the price for his blood."

They had been speaking in their own language, not in Egyptian, and had been using an interpreter to speak to Joseph. They did not know that Joseph understood them. Joseph left the room quickly with tears in his eyes. After he got himself under control and returned to the brothers, he picked out Simeon and had him tied up in front of his brothers. Then Joseph gave orders to fill the brothers' sacks with grain and to return the money they had paid for the grain by putting each man's money into his sack. He also told his servants to give his brothers food and water for their journey home. The brothers loaded the sacks of grain onto their donkeys and departed for home, leaving Simeon behind in prison.

When they stopped for the evening one of the brothers opened his sack to get food for his donkey and saw his money at the top of the sack. Surprised, he said to his brothers, "My money was put back in the top of my sack!" The brothers became frightened because they feared that they were being set up to be charged with theft. Why had their god Yahweh not protected them?

When they arrived home they told their father what had happened. They told Jacob, "The man in charge of the country under the Pharaoh spoke harshly to us and accused us of spying on his country. We told him, "We are honest men, we are not spies. We are twelve brothers, sons of one father. One of our brothers is dead and the youngest son is at home with our father in the land of Canaan."

Then the man in charge, the lord of the land, said to us, "If you want to prove that you are telling me the truth as honest men you must leave one of your brothers here with me. I will give you grain because of the famine of your households at home. Go home, but you must return and bring your youngest brother to me. Then I will know that you are not spies but honest men. Then I will release your brother to you and you may do your business in my country."

As they were emptying their sacks in front of Jacob, they found a bag of money in each one's sack. When they and their father saw their bundles of money, they were dismayed. Jacob said to them, "I have lost my children—Joseph is dead, and Simeon is gone, and now you want to take Benjamin to Egypt where he too will be killed. Why has all this happened to me?"

Reuben said to his father, "You may kill my two sons if I do not bring Benjamin back home to you. Trust me. Put him in my care and I will bring him back to you safely."

But Jacob said, "I will not let my son Benjamin go with you to Egypt—his brother Joseph is dead, and after you leave here to go to Egypt Benjamin is all I have left. If he were harmed or killed on the trip to Egypt it would cause my death and I would go to the underground world with my gray hairs and a sorrowful heart."

The sons of Israel (Jacob's name had been changed to Israel by Yahweh) were among many other peoples and tribes who came to Egypt to buy grain, for the famine had reached throughout the land of Canaan. There is a word play on *Israel* here, Jacob as an individual and as a symbol of the Jewish people.

Only ten brothers went on the journey—Benjamin was one of two sons of Jacob by his wife Rachel, the other being Joseph, and Benjamin was a favorite that he was not willing to risk on the journey.

BENJAMIN IS CHARGED WITH A FELONY

The famine continued throughout the land of Canaan and was getting worse. Soon Jacob's family had eaten the grain that they had brought from Egypt. None of their crops would grow and there was no food left anywhere in their country. They had no alternative but to buy some more food in Egypt, so their father said to his sons, "You must go back to Egypt and buy us some more food."

Judah reminded his father, "If we go we have to take Benjamin with us. The man in charge of the food bank solemnly warned us that he would not see us again or let us buy any more food unless our youngest brother came back with us to prove that the story we told him was true. We will only go back to Egypt if you let Benjamin go with us. It would be dangerous for us to go without Benjamin."

Jacob was annoyed. He asked his sons, "Why did you tell the man that you had another brother? You have created a big problem for us."

The sons replied, "The man questioned us carefully about ourselves and our family. He asked us if our father was still alive and whether we had another brother. We answered his questions. How could we have known that he would demand that we bring our brother back with us?"

Then Judah said, "Father, please send Benjamin with me. You must let us go back to Egypt immediately to get more food so that all of us may live and not die—you and we and also our little ones will starve if we do not get food. I will personally guarantee that I will bring Benjamin back and you can hold me accountable for his safety. If I do not bring him back to you then let me bear the blame forever. If we had not spent so much

time arguing over this we would have been able to go and come back twice."

Jacob finally relented and said to his sons, "If that is the way it must be, ok, go ahead and take Benjamin with you, but also take with you some of the choice products of our land and give them as a gift to the manager of the food—a little balm and a little honey, gum, resin, pistachio nuts, and almonds. Take twice as much money as you need to buy the food. Take back the money that was returned in your sacks on your last trip because perhaps it was just a mistake. Take your brother Benjamin and be on your way to Egypt to see the manager of the food bank. May *Yahweh The Almighty* protect you on your journey and send back your brother Simeon as well as Benjamin. As for me, if I lose my children, I will be heartbroken and in mourning for them until I die."

The brothers took gifts for the manager of grain sales and double the money they needed to pay for grain so they could repay the money they found in their bags when they got home from their previous trip, and they took Benjamin and went on their long journey to Egypt. When they got to Egypt they went immediately to Joseph's office.

When Joseph saw that Benjamin was with them he said to his assistant, "Bring the men to my house, and slaughter an animal and prepare a great feast. These men are to dine with me at noon." The servants did as Joseph commanded and brought the brothers to Joseph's house. The brothers were afraid when they learned they were being taken to Joseph's house and as they talked about it they concluded that it must be because of the money they found in their sacks on their return from their previous trip to Egypt. They suspected they were being taken away so the Egyptians could attack them or kill them, or make them slaves and take their donkeys.

Fearfully they spoke to the house manager, who met them at the entrance of Joseph's house, and said to him, "Sir, we came to Egypt a couple of years ago to buy food and on our way home when we stopped at our lodging place for the night we opened our sacks and there was our money in the top of each man's sack. We don't know how it got there, but all our money that we had paid for grain was in the sacks. So we have brought it back with us and we brought additional money to buy food. We do not know who put the money in our sacks."

The house manager said, "Don't worry about it. There's no problem. Your god or the god of your father must have put that money in your sacks for you. We have your money." Then he brought their brother Simeon from the jail to join them.

The house manager brought the brothers into Joseph's house, gave them water so they could wash their feet, and gave them fodder for their donkeys. He told the brothers that Joseph was coming at noon to dine with them. The brothers prepared for dinner and got out the gifts they had brought for Joseph.

When Joseph returned home, the brothers gave him the gifts they had brought and bowed to the ground in front of him. Joseph inquired about their welfare and asked them, "Is your father well, the old man of whom you spoke? Is he still alive?"

"Yes," they said, "your servant our father is alive and well." And they bowed their heads respectfully in deference to his rank. Then Joseph noticed his brother Benjamin, his mother's son, and said, "Is this your youngest brother, the one you told me about when you were here before?"

Suddenly Joseph rushed out of the room without saying anything else because he was overcome with emotion and affection for his brother and tears were forming in his eyes. So he went into a private room where they could not see his tears.

Then he washed his face and returned to the brothers and controlling himself he said to the servants, "Serve the meal."

First the servants served dinner to Joseph at his own table, then served the brothers who sat by themselves at a separate table. Finally the servants served dinner to the other Egyptians who ate with Joseph at his table. The Egyptians would not eat at the same table with the Hebrews for they considered them to have lower social status than Egyptians and eating with them would be unacceptable and disgraceful.

They were seated at a separate table from Joseph, according to their age, from the first born who had the birthright down to the youngest. They were surprised when they noticed that the amount of food set before Benjamin was five times as much as theirs. They considered that a good sign, so they relaxed, ate and drank and had a good time.

After dinner Joseph commanded his house manager, "Fill the men's sacks with food, as much as they can carry, and put each man's money in the top of his sack. Put my cup, the silver cup, in the top of the sack of the youngest, along with his money for the grain."

The house manager did as Joseph told him. The brothers went to sleep in the guest quarters of Joseph's house. Early the next morning, as soon as it was light outside, the brothers said goodbye to their host and started out on their journey home, with their donkeys and their full sacks of grain.

After they had been gone only a short time Joseph said to his house manager, "Take some officers with you and go after the Hebrews who just left here. When you catch up to them arrest them and ask them, 'Why did you return my kindness to you with criminal behavior? Why did you steal from us after we were good to you? Why did you steal my master's silver cup, the

one he drinks his wine from, the one he uses to see the future? You have done wrong.”

The house manager did as he was told. Quickly he overtook the brothers on the road and arrested them, and said to them as he had been instructed. The brothers were shocked at their arrest. They said to the manager, "Why does my lord accuse us of these things? We would not do what you accuse us of! We returned the money that we found at the top of our sacks when we got home from our last trip to Egypt. Why then would we steal silver or gold from your lord's house? If you can find anything on us that we have stolen you can kill the thief and you can take the rest of us as slaves to your master."

The house manager said, "Well, as you have said, that's pretty much what will happen—except that we will make a slave of the guilty man and the rest of you will go free."

Under the careful eye of the manager, the brothers unloaded their donkeys and opened their sacks. The officers started searching them, starting with the oldest and down to the youngest—and when they got to Benjamin's sack they found the missing silver cup that belonged to Joseph. The brothers were stunned and shocked. In grief they tore their clothes. Then they loaded their donkeys again and returned with the officers to the city. They were taken directly to Joseph's house.

When they saw Joseph they got down on their faces in front of him.

Joseph said to them, "What have you done? Don't you realize that a man in my position knows what is going on and can even see into the future?"

Judah said, "I don't know what to say. I don't know what we can tell you to clear our names of these false charges. I don't know

how to convince you that we are innocent. Yahweh himself has made us appear guilty, so there's nothing we can do about it. So now we are your slaves, all of us, as well as the one who was found with the stolen cup in his possession."

Joseph said to them, "That's not the way I do things. Only the one who is actually guilty, the man found with my cup, shall become my slave. The rest of you are free to go. Go in peace back to your father and to your homes."

Then Judah stepped up to Joseph and said to him, "Please, sir, let me speak to you directly, and please do not be angry with me. You are like the Pharaoh himself. When we were here before you asked us whether we had a father or a brother. I told you, yes, we have a father back home in Canaan, an old man now. We used to have a younger brother, the child of his old age, but he is dead, and there is another brother we left at home with our father, and our father would not let him come to Egypt with us for fear something would happen to him and our father would then be left alone. But you said to us that you wanted to see the brother we left at home. We told you that the boy cannot leave his father, for if he should leave his father and not return, his father would die of grief.

"Then you told us, 'Unless your youngest brother comes down with you, I will not see you again and you will not be able to buy food from us.'

"So we went home and told our father what you said. You kept our brother Simeon here as a hostage. Still our father would not let us come back here and bring our youngest brother. But the famine continued and one day our father said to us, 'You must go back to Egypt again and buy us some food, because we have to eat, we don't have any choice.'

"We told our father, 'We cannot go back to Egypt without taking our youngest brother Benjamin with us. The man in charge in Egypt will not see us or sell us any food unless our youngest brother is with us.'

"So my father said to us, 'You know that my wife bore me two sons. One did not return home and we believe that he was torn to pieces somewhere on the road—anyway I have not seen him since. If you take this son from me also and harm comes to him, you will bring down my gray hairs in sorrow to the underworld of the dead.' Benjamin is everything my father has left in the world that gives him the will to live. If I go home to my father and Benjamin is not with us, then when he sees that the boy is not with us, he will die, and we will be responsible for our elderly gray-haired father departing this life to the underworld in great sorrow. I gave my word to my father that I would bring him back safely. I made a pledge that if I do not bring him back home again then I will bear the blame in the sight of my father all my life. Please let me take Benjamin's place as a slave and let the boy go back home with his brothers. How can I go back to my father if the boy is not with me? I fear to see the suffering that would come upon my father."

Joseph could no longer control himself before all those members of his household who were standing around. He shouted, "All of you, get out of here except for these men." Immediately all his staff and members of his household left the room. When Joseph was alone with his brothers he let them know who he was—their lost brother Joseph. Joseph was overcome with emotion and wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard it from another room. Joseph said to his brothers, "I am Joseph. Is my father still alive?"

His brothers were speechless with shock and did not answer him immediately. Then Joseph said to his brothers, "Come closer to

me." And they came closer. He said, "I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. Do not be distressed or angry with yourselves that you sold me because Yahweh sent me here to preserve life. There has been famine and starvation throughout the land these past two years and there are five more years coming in which it will be pointless to plow the dry barren fields because there will be no crops to harvest. Yahweh has sent me to save lives in this time of trouble, and I have become very powerful and I rule over all the land of Egypt."

Then he told his brothers to go back home immediately and to tell their father that Joseph is alive and well and ruler of all Egypt and to bring their father, and their entire families, with all their flocks and herds and move to Egypt to live in new lands that he would give them in the eastern part of the Nile delta region known as the Land of Goshen. He told his brothers: "There I will provide you and your households with food and whatever you need so that you do not end up in poverty. You can see that it is me, your brother, who speaks to you. Now you must go home and tell my father that I am greatly honored in Egypt, and you must bring my father to me. There were tears and hugs all around and lots of conversation about what had happened in the years they were apart from each other.

When the news reached Pharaoh that Joseph's brothers had come to Egypt, he was happy for Joseph and commanded him: "Tell your brothers to load up their animals and go home to Canaan and then return with their father and their entire households. I will give them some of the best land in Egypt to live on. Take wagons with you to transport the women and children. Don't worry about what you are leaving behind, because I will give you fertile lands here in Egypt."

Joseph did as Pharaoh commanded. He sent them home with wagons and provisions for the journey. To each of them he gave

a set of new clothes. In addition he gave Benjamin five sets of new clothes and 300 pieces of silver, and for his father he sent 20 donkeys loaded with grain, bread and provisions for the trip from Canaan back to Egypt. He sent the brothers back to Canaan with one final instruction—don't quarrel among yourselves along the way.

When they got home to Canaan and told their father what had happened he was stunned and could hardly believe them. But when he saw the wagons, the donkeys, and the things that had been sent back with the brothers he was finally convinced—and overjoyed that his son Joseph was still alive, and told his sons, "I can hardly believe that my son Joseph is still alive. Now I must go and see him before I die."

Jacob had twelve sons, but only two (Joseph and Benjamin) were sons of his beloved wife Rachel and he favored those two, who were also his youngest. His other children were mothered by Leah or by the servant-concubines.

The names of the twelve brothers are *patronyms*, and represent the twelve tribes that are believed to have joined together to form the later nation of Israel.

JOSEPH SWEARS ON THE FAMILY JEWELS

Jacob prepared to move to Egypt. It was a pretty dramatic move—all his family, his possessions, his flocks and herds, and his entire tribe were about to take a very long trip, leaving behind everything they were familiar with, to move to a far away country. Jacob, because he was the tribal leader, offered sacrifices to the god of his father Isaac just before they started out, seeking the god's support and protection on the trip.

Jacob was very concerned about whether moving to Egypt was the right thing for him to do. The night before they were to start out on their journey Jacob had a dream in which Yahweh said to him, "Jacob, I am the god of your father Isaac. Don't be afraid. I am planning to make you the father of a great nation. I am going along with you on the trip to Egypt. I will make sure you get there and that you see Joseph. You will die in Egypt. You will be with your son Joseph when you die, and he will be there to close your eyes and bury you."

The next morning the caravan started out on the journey to Egypt. Jacob and the women and children rode in the wagons that Joseph had sent to carry them back to Egypt. It was a very large procession because they carried with them their entire families, 70 people in all, with everything they owned, including their flocks of sheep and goats and their herds of cattle.

As they approached Egypt Jacob sent Judah ahead to tell Joseph they were almost as far as Goshen in the eastern Delta of Egypt where they were to make their new home. When Joseph got word from Judah that Jacob and the caravan were just about to arrive in Egypt, he got into his chariot and went to meet his father. They arrived in Goshen at about the same time. Joseph went up to his father, held him in his arms, and cried briefly.

Jacob said to his long lost son Joseph, "I can die happy now that I have seen for myself that you are still alive."

Joseph said to his brothers and to those who were traveling with them, "Now that I have greeted you I will go to Pharaoh and tell him that my family has arrived, together with their herds and everything they own. Please listen—this is important. Pharaoh may ask you about your occupation. Be careful how you answer. Tell him that you and your ancestors before you are keepers of livestock. That will satisfy him and he won't object to you settling on Egyptian land in Goshen. The Egyptians do not like shepherds and don't want shepherds settling on their land."

So Joseph took five of the brothers and went back to the capital city where he lived and told Pharaoh that his father and brothers had arrived from the land of Canaan and they were now camped at Goshen. He presented the five brothers to Pharaoh and Pharaoh asked them about their occupation. They said to Pharaoh, "We have come to reside as aliens in the land of Egypt because there is no pasture for our herds in the land of Canaan because the famine is quite severe there. We ask you to let us settle in the land of Goshen."

Pharaoh said to Joseph, "The entire land of Egypt is before you. Let your father and your brothers settle in the best part of the land, let them live in the land of Goshen, and if you know of some very capable men among them, hire them as herdsman and put them in charge of my livestock."

Later when Jacob had rested from the trip and was able to travel Joseph brought him to the city and presented him to Pharaoh. Jacob then gave Pharaoh his blessing of gratitude. Pharaoh asked Jacob, "How old are you?"

Jacob answered, "I've been a traveler on this earth for 130 difficult years, not nearly as long as my ancestors, some of whom lived a very long time."

After the interview with Pharaoh was over, Joseph settled his father and brothers in the best part of the land, as Pharaoh Rameses had instructed. Joseph provided his father, his brothers, and his father's entire household with food, each man getting enough for his dependents.

The famine continued to be very severe throughout the entire region. Joseph sold grain to all who needed it and collected huge amounts of money, which he gave to Pharaoh for his treasury. When the people ran out of money they went to Joseph and begged him to give them food for they had exhausted all their resources.

Joseph told the people, "If your money is all gone so that you cannot buy food, then sell me your livestock and I will give you food in exchange."

The people of the land had no choice. It was either that or starve, so they brought their livestock to Joseph—their horses, their flocks, their herds, and their donkeys—which they traded for food. They survived the year.

The famine and drought continued. So again the next year the people came to Joseph and said to him, "We are hungry. We need food. You know our money is gone. You know we have no more herds of cattle, because we have given everything to the Pharaoh. We have nothing left but our bodies and our lands. We are starving. We need food or we will die right here in front of you. We will sell you our bodies to be your slaves and we will sell you our land if you will give us food to eat. Buy us and our land in exchange for food. We will become slaves to Pharaoh, but give us grain, so that we may live and not die."

So Joseph bought all the land in Egypt for Pharaoh. All the Egyptians sold their fields for food because the famine was severe and they were starving. So Pharaoh became the owner of all the land in Egypt. He made slaves of the people from one end of Egypt to the other. The one exception was that he did not buy the land of the priests because they had a fixed allowance from Pharaoh and lived on the allowance that Pharaoh gave them so they did not need to sell their land.

After the famine was over Joseph issued a proclamation to the people of Egypt, "Now the Pharaoh owns you and your land. So here is the way it will be from now on. We will give you seed. You must plant the seed and grow food crops. When harvest time comes you shall give one-fifth of what you grow to Pharaoh. You shall keep four-fifths for your selves, to use some as seed for next year's crops and the rest as food for yourselves, and for your households, and for food for your little ones."

The people were grateful to Pharaoh, and said to Joseph, "You have saved our lives. We will be slaves to Pharaoh willingly." So Joseph made his proclamation the law of the land of Egypt and the law stands to this day that Pharaoh gets a fifth of all the production of the land.

So Israel settled in the land of Egypt in the region of Goshen in the delta. The land was productive. The people grew in numbers and they were quite successful and became wealthy.

When the time of Jacob's death drew near, he asked Joseph to come and see him, and when Joseph got to him, he asked Joseph: "I have a favor to ask you. I want you to promise me that you will carry out my last wishes faithfully. Place your hands under my thigh and promise to deal loyally and truly with me. Do not bury me in Egypt. When I join my ancestors in death

carry me out of Egypt and bury me in the burial cave of my ancestors."

He answered, "I will do as you have said."

Jacob said, "Swear to me." Jacob swore the oath to him.

Not very many years later Jacob summoned Joseph and his brothers to his death bed and said to them, "I am about to die. Remember you promised in a sacred oath to bury me with my ancestors in the cave in the field of Ephron the Hittite in the land of Canaan, the cave that Abraham bought as a burial site. Abraham and his wife Sarah are buried there, Isaac and his wife Rebekah are buried there, and that is where I buried Leah...." Having said those last words, he breathed his last and joined his ancestors in the place of the dead.

Joseph threw himself on his father's body and cried—and then he commanded the physicians in his service to embalm his father. So the physicians spent the usual forty days embalming him, followed by seventy days of mourning for the dead, but when the days of mourning were over Joseph went to the Pharaoh and asked him for permission to leave Egypt to take his father home to the land of Canaan as he had promised. Pharaoh agreed.

Joseph traveled to Canaan to bury his father, taking with him the senior members of his staff and some Egyptian officials as well as adult members of his family, his brothers, and his father's family. They left the children behind in the land of Goshen along with their flocks and their herds. They were accompanied on their journey by soldiers in chariots. It was a large and impressive group of travelers that accompanied Joseph on his trip.

They crossed over the Jordan River into Canaan, stopping first at the threshing floor of Atad, which is near the sacred place of Yahweh at Hebron. There they held a sorrowful memorial service followed by another seven days of mourning. Then they carried Jacob's coffin to the cave at Machpelah, which Abraham had bought as a burial site from Ephron the Hittite. After he buried his father, Joseph returned to Egypt with those who had accompanied him on his trip.

Realizing that their father was dead, Joseph's brothers began to worry about their safety. While their father was alive they believed that they were safe because Joseph would not harm them, but they began to worry that if Joseph still has a grudge against them for selling him into slavery, he might decide to get revenge and harm or imprison them. So they went to Joseph and told him that Jacob had told them before he died that he wanted them to go to Joseph and beg forgiveness for the wrong they had done to him. They got on their knees and begged for forgiveness and told Joseph that they would be his slaves.

Joseph got tears in his eyes when he heard them beg, and he said to his brothers, "Do not be afraid! Even though you intended to harm me, I will not harm you. I am not a god and I do not take revenge. Actually it all turned out fine because Yahweh wanted me to save many people by putting me in charge in Egypt. I will take care of you and your children." So they were much happier once they heard Joseph speak kindly to them and tell them he would still provide what they needed to live.

Joseph and his family, including his brothers, remained in Egypt. Joseph had children and grandchildren, and when he got old he said to his brothers, "I am about to die. Some day Yahweh will come back here and lead our family back to the land of Canaan, as he swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob. When he comes

to get us out of here I want you to promise that you will carry my bones from this land where we now live and take me back to Canaan.” He made them all swear to do as he asked.

Joseph died when he was one hundred ten years old. He was embalmed and placed in a coffin in Egypt.

Pharaoh Rameses I, who may have been the Pharaoh of this story, was himself a foreigner, a former military commander of the Hyksos, a militant tribal group that settled in the northern part of Egypt and had its capital close to the delta area, the Land of Goshen of this story. If there is any valid history reflected in this story, the fact that Pharaoh was a member of the Hyksos movement into Egypt may account for the friendliness of the Pharaoh to these Hebrew outsiders who wanted to settle in the fertile Nile delta.

This story provides a rationale and a benevolent explanation for the Pharaoh owning all the land, for the existence of slavery in Egypt and for the 20% tax that was levied on all citizens (excluding the priests) for the support of the Pharaoh (the government).

The sacred oath was sworn by placing the hands “under the thigh” which may be a euphemism for “between my thighs” or “on my genitals”—which seems odd unless you consider that the genitals are a source of power and represent future generations. The intent appears to be “swear to me and to future generations,” that is, this promise is forever.

A “threshing floor” was a large circular level space on which rocks had been laid out to form a floor. It was used for separating out the grain at harvest time.

MOSES ESCAPES DEATH—TWICE!

Joseph and his brothers died in Egypt and soon their entire generation was gone. Large numbers of Hebrews had moved into the Nile delta region during the time of Joseph and the Hebrew population had grown steadily in numbers and wealth through the years. The Hebrew foreigners controlled large tracts of land in the Delta on which they grew grain and kept large herds of sheep, goats and cattle.

Unfortunately for the Hebrews a new pharaoh came to the throne of Egypt who was not as tolerant of the Hebrew settlers as previous pharaohs had been. The new pharaoh was from central Egypt, far away from the Delta. He was unhappy with the large number of nomadic foreigners who had moved into Egypt through the years, partly because they occupied fertile land in the northern Delta but also because he believed that their increasing wealth and power threatened his control of Egypt. Once he was firmly in power he developed a plan to get the Hebrews under his control so that if an enemy power attacked Egypt the Hebrews would not be able to join Egypt's enemies.

The pharaoh ordered two new cities to be built, each with large warehouses for food storage. He drafted the Hebrew men as forced laborers and put them under the control of Egyptian taskmasters and Hebrew supervisors. They were ordered to build the new storage cities. Despite ruthless supervision and hard labor the Hebrew population continued to flourish and the pharaoh continued to worry.

So the pharaoh came up with a new plan. He gathered the Hebrew midwives together and told them, "When you are assisting during childbirth, if the baby is a boy, you must kill him

discreetly so he appears to have been stillborn, but if it is a girl, you can let her live."

The midwives were more afraid of Yahweh than they were of the pharaoh so they ignored him and let the boys live. Frustrated that his instructions to kill all male babies were not being followed, the pharaoh again summoned the midwives and said to them, "Why did you ignore my instructions and let the boys to live?"

The midwives replied, "The Hebrew women are not like Egyptian women; they are strong and give birth without calling for a midwife, and even if the midwife hears about a woman giving birth and comes to help, she has given birth already so we do not have an opportunity to discreetly kill the male child."

The pharaoh became increasingly unhappy and frustrated, so he tried another approach to get the Hebrews under control. He ordered Egyptians to go into the homes of the Hebrews to search for children and to throw every boy they found into the Nile to drown.

Soon afterwards a Hebrew woman gave birth to a healthy baby boy and hid him in her home as long as she could. When the baby was about three months old she became afraid the child would be discovered and it was no longer safe for her to hide the infant in her house. She made a papyrus basket and plastered the outside with tar to waterproof it, and then she put the child in the basket and placed it among the reeds near the bank of the river. The woman told her daughter, the baby's older sister, to watch the basket from a distance to see what would happen.

Later in the day the daughter of the pharaoh came down to bathe at the river, while her attendants waited nearby on the

bank beside the river. She saw the basket among the reeds and called her maid to retrieve it for her. When she opened the basket, she saw the child, who was crying, and she took pity on him.

"This must be one of the Hebrew children," she said. Then his sister, who had seen the basket being given to the pharaoh's daughter, came up to her and said, "Shall I go and get you a nurse from the Hebrew women to nurse the child for you?"

"Yes," said the pharaoh's daughter, "please find a nurse for the child."

So the girl went home and told her mother what had happened. The mother went to the pharaoh's daughter, who told her, "Take this child and nurse it for me, and I will pay you well." So the mother took the child and nursed it. When the child was old enough the mother brought the young boy to the pharaoh's daughter, who took him as her son. She named him Moses.

One day when Moses was a young man he walked out to the construction site where his people were working as forced laborers. He saw an Egyptian task master beating a Hebrew. Moses looked around and—seeing no one—he killed the Egyptian and hid his body in the sand.

The next day Moses again took a walk to the construction site. He saw two Hebrews fighting so he said to the one who started the fight, "Why did you assault your fellow Hebrew?"

The man answered angrily, "Mind your own business. Who made you our judge? Do you intend to kill me as you killed the Egyptian?" Then Moses became afraid because he knew that someone had seen him kill the Egyptian overseer and the news had spread among the Hebrews.

Word quickly got back to the pharaoh that Moses had killed one of his officers so the pharaoh sent his agents to find Moses and kill him in retaliation. Moses ran away before they could find him and he kept running until he reached the far off land of Midian.

Pharaoh is the equivalent of *king*. We do not know the name of the pharaoh in this story. Ruling families (dynasties) changed periodically through assassination or conquest, sometimes as a result of the struggle between the northern and southern kingdoms in Egypt, which eventually became united into a single kingdom.

THE TALKING BRUSH FIRE

Moses escaped from Egypt. He was tired of running from the Egyptian agents so when he finally reached Midian he sat down by a well near the village. While he was resting from his long trip, seven daughters of a local landowner arrived at the well to water their sheep. Before they had finished drawing water from the well some impatient shepherds came along with their flocks and did not want to wait their turn so they tried to chase the young women away from the well. Moses saw the men bothering the young ladies, came to their defense, chased away the shepherds and helped the women water their sheep.

The women thanked Moses and then headed home. Their father asked them why they had come home so early in the afternoon. They told him about the attack by the shepherds and their rescue at the hand of an Egyptian who had come to their defense and had helped them draw water for the sheep.

So the surprised father asked his daughters, “Where is the man who helped you? Why didn’t you invite him to our house to join us in a meal?”

The father, whose name was Jethro, sent his daughters back to the well to find Moses and invite him to come back to the house with them for dinner. Moses and Jethro got along well and Moses accepted Jethro’s invitation to live with him and his family. Shortly afterwards Moses married one of Jethro’s daughters.

Moses became a shepherd and tended the flock of his father-in-law. The flock needed more grassland than was available close by so Moses led the flock far out beyond the local fields and eventually came to Horeb, the mountain where Yahweh lived.

A messenger from Lord Yahweh suddenly appeared to Moses as a flame of fire rising out of a bush. The bush appeared to be on fire but was not burned up. He was curious, so he went over to the bush to check it out. The Lord Yahweh saw that Moses was coming over to see the flaming bush, so he called out to him. Moses said, "Here I am."

Then the Lord Yahweh said to Moses, "Stop right there! Do not come any closer! Take off your sandals because you are standing on my holy ground. This is where I live."

Lord Yahweh continued, "You don't know me. I am the god of your father, the god of Abraham, the god of Isaac, and the god of Jacob." Moses covered his face with his hands because he was afraid to look at Lord Yahweh.

Then the Lord Yahweh said to Moses, "I have seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard their cries of pain and I have seen the physical abuse they have suffered at the hand of their taskmasters. I have come down here from my mountain to rescue them from the Egyptians. I have decided that it is time to bring them out of Egypt to that new land I promised their ancestors a long time ago, a land flowing with milk and honey, a land with many riches, a land now occupied by the Canaanites, the Hittites, and the Amorites."

"So, Moses," Lord Yahweh continued, "I have a job for you. I need you to go back to Egypt and lead my people to the land I promised them."

Moses said to Yahweh, "Are you serious? Who am I that I should go to the pharaoh and tell him to let the Israelites leave Egypt? Why would the pharaoh listen to me? That's not going to happen!"

Lord Yahweh was annoyed. He said to Moses, "Just do it. I will be with you every step of the way. After you get the people out of Egypt you must bring them here to my mountain and then you must make sacrifices to me and bring me gifts."

Moses was not convinced. He said to Yahweh, "If I go to the Israelites and say to them, 'The gods of your ancestors have sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'Who sent you? What is his name? What am I supposed to say?'"

Yahweh said to Moses, "Tell them that Lord Yahweh said, 'I am who I am.' That's all they need to know. Tell them that the Lord Yahweh, the god of their ancestors, the god of Abraham, the god of Isaac, the god of Jacob—I am all of them, actually—sent you to get them out of Egypt. Go to Egypt, meet with my people, assemble the elders of Israel, and say to them, 'The Lord Yahweh, the God of your ancestors, has appeared to me, he has heard what has been done to you in Egypt, and he told me it is time that he keep the promise he made to your ancestors to give you a land of your own.'"

"So," Yahweh said to Moses, "Tell them that you have come to lead them out of their misery and troubles in Egypt to the land of the Canaanites, the Hittites, and the Amorites, a rich land flowing with milk and honey. Tell them that the elders of Israel are to go to the pharaoh and say to him, 'Lord Yahweh, the God of the Hebrews, has told us that we must travel three days' journey into the desert wilderness to meet him and make sacrifices to him.' Tell them, 'that's our cover story, of course we are not going to stay in the wilderness, we are going to escape from Egypt to our new land.'"

Yahweh continued, "I know that the pharaoh will not let them leave unless he is forced to do so. So I will use my great power to make life miserable for the Egyptians and when I am finished

with them the pharaoh will let them go. Then after the pharaoh agrees to let you go I will cause your Egyptian neighbors to be so happy you are leaving that they will gladly give you their silver and gold, their jewelry, their best clothing—so as you leave their country you will essentially plunder them of their valuables and you will then have cash for your journey.

Moses grew up in Egypt. He would have been familiar with the gods of Egypt, but he would have had no reason to be familiar with Lord Yahweh, who was a desert god.

In this story and hereafter we refer to *Israelites* rather than *Hebrews*. Jacob, a patriarchal ancestor, had his name changed by Lord Yahweh to *Israel* at the time he promised the land of Canaan to Jacob's descendants, thereby making Israel the symbolic father (patronym) of the group of related tribes that together conquered Canaan and subsequently became the kingdoms of Judah and Israel.

The collector of these early Hebrew stories has a philosophical viewpoint—he weaves a narrative that tries to show that the various tribal gods of their Hebrew ancestors are actually the same god under different names. Just as the separate tribes merged into a large group composed of several tribes, so the separate tribal gods were merged into one god known by the personal name *Yahweh*.

A land flowing with milk and honey means a rich and fertile land that can provide the good things of life.

LORD YAHWEH ATTACKS MOSES

Moses wasn't convinced this escape plan would work. He said to Yahweh, "Suppose they don't believe me? What if they don't listen to me? Suppose they say I made up this story and Yahweh didn't actually ask me to lead this exodus out of Egypt?"

Yahweh replied, "What are you holding in your hand?"

Moses said, "My walking staff."

"Throw it on the ground," said Lord Yahweh. So he threw the staff on the ground and it became a snake. Moses was frightened and jumped back quickly.

Lord Yahweh said, "Grab the snake by its tail."

So, reluctantly, Moses grabbed the snake by the tail and it became a staff again in his hand.

Then Lord Yahweh said to him, "Put your hand inside your robe." Moses did as he was told, but when he took his hand out it was infected with leprosy. Yahweh told him to put his hand back under his robe, and this time when he took it out his hand was normal and healthy.

"So," said Yahweh, "here's the point. If the Israelites don't believe you, do these tricks. That should convince them. If the first two don't work, here's another one. Take some water from the Nile and pour it on dry ground and as soon as it hits the ground it will become blood. I've got a lot more tricks if we need them."

“OK,” said Moses to Lord Yahweh. “Suppose I go to Egypt with my tricks. Then what? I am a shepherd. I have never spoken in public. I don’t know how to make speeches. How will I know what to say? I have trouble with words. I am not very well educated. How can I find the words to speak to the pharaoh and how can I speak well enough to convince these people to follow me out of Egypt? You’re asking too much.”

Yahweh said to him, “Look Moses. Just do it. I will guide your words and your thoughts.”

Moses told Yahweh, “I can’t do this. You need to send someone else.”

Then Yahweh got angry. “Moses I am tired of arguing. How about your brother Aaron? He can speak well. He’s on his way here to meet you and he will be happy to see you. He can help you. You will tell him what to say. I will put the words in your mouth. I will tell you what to say to Aaron, and I will guide his mouth when he speaks. He will speak for you. He will be your mouth. Take your staff, which you will need to prove your authority, take Aaron with you, and get on your way. Don’t worry about your safety. There has been a change of government in Egypt and the people who were trying to kill you are all dead. The Egyptians have forgotten about you.”

So with no more excuses, Moses made plans to return to Egypt. First he went back to Jethro and told him that he had to go back to Egypt to see if any of his relatives there were still alive. Jethro said to Moses, “If you must leave, then go in peace.”

So Moses took his wife and his sons, put them on donkeys, and headed toward Egypt. He carried the magic staff in his hand.

While he was traveling on the journey to Egypt the Lord Yahweh said to him, "When you arrive in Egypt go to the pharaoh. Do all those magic tricks I showed you to prove your authority. He still will not agree to let the Israelites go. I will cause him to refuse to let the Israelites leave Egypt and then I am going to punish him for refusing. So after he refuses tell him that Yahweh is now going to kill his firstborn son."

Moses and his family continued their journey. While they were traveling Lord Yahweh found out that Moses had never circumcised his son and he became very angry. Late one afternoon when Moses and his family were on the road and about to stop for the night the Lord Yahweh met them along the road and tried to kill Moses. While Moses and Lord Yahweh were fighting in the road, Moses' wife Zipporah quickly took a flint and cut off her son's foreskin and touched Moses' feet with it as she said angrily to him, "You are a bloody husband to me—with your bloody circumcision!" Yahweh saw that Moses' son had now been circumcised so he stopped fighting and let Moses live.

The failure of Moses to have his son circumcised and Yahweh's consequent attack on Moses is curious. Most likely it is an editorial comment added by a scribe at the time this story was written down, probably as a warning to Israelites with foreign wives that regardless of their wives' views on the matter their sons must be circumcised or they would be subject to the death penalty.

THE PLAN BACKFIRES

The Lord Yahweh went to see Moses' brother Aaron, who was still in Egypt, and said to him, "Leave Egypt. Go into the wilderness to meet your brother Moses, who is on his way here to see the pharaoh." So Aaron left Egypt and met Moses at Mount Horeb, the mountain where Lord Yahweh lived. After they exchanged greetings, Moses told Aaron everything that Lord Yahweh had said to him about the mission to get the Israelites out of Egypt. Moses and Aaron then continued together to Egypt.

Once there Moses and Aaron assembled the elders of the Israelites. Aaron told the people what he had been told to say by Moses and showed them the magic tricks Lord Yahweh had given them. The people believed Moses and Aaron, and when they heard that the Lord Yahweh had seen their misery and was going to get them out of Egypt, they were grateful, and started singing songs praising Lord Yahweh.

Moses and Aaron went to the pharaoh and said, "The Lord Yahweh, the god of the Israelites, demands that you let his people leave Egypt so they can perform sacrifices to him in the desert."

The pharaoh laughed at their insolence and said, "Who is this Lord Yahweh that I should care what he wants? I have not heard of Lord Yahweh and I will not let the Israelites leave my country."

Moses and Aaron argued with the pharaoh. They said, "The Lord Yahweh, god of the Israelites, has come to us and told us that we must travel three days into the wilderness to sacrifice to him or he will punish us with sickness and death."

The pharaoh said to them, "You don't seriously expect me to let hundreds of my laborers stop working for three days to follow you out into the wilderness for a religious camp meeting? You and the rest of the Hebrews need to get back to work. Now get out of here."

Later that day the pharaoh called the taskmasters to a meeting and said to them, "Apparently these foreign workers do not have enough to do. Don't provide them any more straw to make bricks, as you have been doing. Make them gather their own straw. But they must continue to make the same quantity of bricks as they are required to make now. Don't reduce their quota. They are lazy and I am going to teach them a lesson. They foolishly asked to get a week off so they can make sacrifices and have a festival to their god out in the desert. Make them work harder. Then they will labor at their jobs and pay no attention to their leaders' deceptive words that make them think that I will pay any attention to what they want."

So the taskmasters and the supervisors went to the Israelites and told them that the pharaoh had ordered that they must now gather the straw necessary for making bricks wherever they can find it, but their daily quota of bricks will remain the same as it was before.

The people now had to go outside the city to try to find straw in the fields and pastures and that slowed down their production so much that they could not meet their daily quota of bricks. The taskmasters were merciless. They screamed at the workers because they were not making the required number of bricks each day. The workers were beaten when they could not meet their quota. Then their supervisors were beaten because they were not able to make their fellow Israelites work any harder to meet their quota.

The supervisors complained to the pharaoh that it was unreasonable to make the workers meet the same quota as before. They were given an impossible job and it was unfair to beat them for not reaching impossible goals. The pharaoh replied that they were being punished because they were lazy and because they wanted time off to make sacrifices in the desert. He refused to reduce the daily quota of bricks.

Moses and Aaron were waiting outside to hear the results of the meeting. The supervisors complained to Moses that he had brought all this trouble on his people by his ridiculous demand that the pharaoh give the people time off to go into the desert to make sacrifices and have a religious festival. They were angry at Moses because he was causing them trouble, beatings and even death.

Moses was upset and he complained to Lord Yahweh. He said, "Yahweh, why are you letting the people be mistreated? Why did you send me to do an impossible job? I went to the pharaoh as you demanded, I told him what you said, and the result is that the people are being mistreated, beaten, even killed. You have caused this problem! You have done nothing to help, and now I am being blamed for the suffering of the people. They think it's my fault."

Then the Lord Yahweh said to Moses, "Relax and pay attention! You are about to see what I am going to do to the pharaoh: When I get through with him he will let the people go. In fact he will be so eager to let them go he will drive them out of his land. Don't forget who I am—the powerful Lord Yahweh. A long time ago I appeared to your ancestors Abraham, and Isaac and Jacob as their tribal god. Jacob knew me as *God the Almighty One*—but I never told any of them my real name. I made them promises. I told them I would give them the land of Canaan, where they used to live as outsiders. I never told them *when* I

was going to give them that land. I heard them whining and complaining about their mistreatment at the hand of Egyptians. I did not forget my promises.”

“Tell the people that the time has come. Tell them who I am. Tell them my name. Tell them that I am the powerful Lord Yahweh. Tell them that I am now going to keep my promise made so many years ago to Abraham. Tell them I am going to lead them into the land of Canaan, and with my power I am going to drive out the people who live there and give the land to them. I will make it your land.”

So Moses spoke to the people again but this time they would not listen to him. Their spirits were broken with the slavery and the cruel mistreatment they were suffering under the pharaoh’s taskmasters. They believed their situation was hopeless. Moses had his chance, they had listened to him before and it did no good. They would not listen to him again.

To ancient Hebrews the *name* of a god was important because it reveals the god’s character and his power. It was also a sacred word that could not be pronounced out loud, so instead of saying their god’s name, they used the generic word *god*.

LORD YAHWEH'S MAGIC SHOW

Lord Yahweh told Moses to go back to the pharaoh. If Moses did what he was told to do and said what he was told to say, the pharaoh would be impressed and think he was a god and his brother Aaron was a prophet. "Here's the fun part," Lord Yahweh told Moses. "Aaron will tell the pharaoh to let the Israelites go, but I am going to make the pharaoh stubborn so that he will refuse to let the Israelites leave Egypt. That will give me the opportunity to use my great power on him. I will bring trouble and misery to Egypt with my power. When I am through with them the Egyptians will know that I am the Lord Yahweh."

So Moses and Aaron went to the pharaoh and did as Lord Yahweh had commanded. When the pharaoh told Moses and Aaron to demonstrate the power of their god Aaron threw down his staff at the feet of the pharaoh and it became a snake.

The pharaoh was not impressed. His wise men and magicians knew how to do the same trick. Each of them threw down his staff and each also became a snake, but then they got a surprise—Aaron's snake ate their snakes. The pharaoh still refused to let the Israelites leave Egypt. Moses and Aaron were frustrated and disappointed. They left the pharaoh and went back to their camp.

Lord Yahweh went to Moses that evening and told him that in the morning when the pharaoh went to the river for his daily bath Moses was to meet him there and tell him once again that the Lord Yahweh insists that he let his people leave Egypt to go out into the desert to make sacrifices. When the pharaoh again refuses to let the people go, he was to strike the river with his staff.

Moses and Aaron did as they were told. Moses struck the water of the Nile with his staff and it turned to blood. He raised his arms to the sky and there was blood throughout the land, in the river, in the canals, in the ponds, wherever there was a pool of water it had turned to blood. The fish in the river died. The river gave off a foul odor. The water was undrinkable. Their water jars were filled with blood.

Not to be outdone by Lord Yahweh's magic power, the pharaoh's sorcerers and magicians also turned water into blood. The pharaoh then dismissed Moses and Aaron and went into his palace. He did not take the Israelites seriously. However because of the blood in all their drinking water the Egyptian people had to dig new wells.

Lord Yahweh tried again. He told Moses to go back to the pharaoh and tell him that if pharaoh did not let the Israelites go then Lord Yahweh would send a plague of frogs throughout Egypt—the Nile would be full of frogs, they would get into the palace, into the pharaoh's bedroom, even into his bed and into the houses of the officials and the people, into their ovens and into their cooking bowls. The pharaoh laughed and refused to let the people leave, so Aaron lifted his staff and the frogs came and covered the country as Moses had warned.

The pharaoh appeared to give in. He asked Moses and Aaron to take away the frogs and he would let the Israelites leave Egypt. Moses then asked the Lord Yahweh to remove the frogs and Lord Yahweh agreed. The frogs died wherever they were—in the houses, the courtyards, the fields—and the Egyptians gathered the dead frogs into huge piles.

As soon as the dead frogs had been cleaned up the pharaoh rescinded his permission for the Israelites to leave, just as Lord Yahweh had predicted. Lord Yahweh told Aaron to touch his

staff to the ground, and as he did so, gnats came out of the ground and landed on people and animals alike. There were so many gnats that it seemed as if all the dirt on the ground had turned to gnats. The pharaoh's magicians tried to produce gnats also, but they couldn't, so they told the pharaoh that their magic was not as strong as that of Lord Yahweh. The pharaoh still refused to let the Israelites leave Egypt.

Lord Yahweh then sent swarms of flies to invade the land of Egypt (except for Goshen, where the Israelites lived) and they pretty much ruined the land and made life very uncomfortable for the people. The pharaoh was very unhappy. He summoned Moses and Aaron and told them they could make sacrifices to Lord Yahweh but that they had to do the sacrifices in Egypt because he was not going to let them leave. After an argument and more magic tricks the pharaoh finally relented and told them they could go into the wilderness to sacrifice to Lord Yahweh provided they did not go very far and provided they got Lord Yahweh to remove the flies. Again the pharaoh did not keep his promise, and once the flies were gone, he refused to let the Israelites leave.

Lord Yahweh next sent deadly disease to strike the livestock. The disease killed horses, donkeys, camels, herds of cattle and flocks of sheep. Yet the pharaoh still refused to let the Israelites leave Egypt.

Lord Yahweh was losing patience. This time he told Moses to take handfuls of ash from the pottery kiln and to go to the pharaoh and to throw it into the air in the pharaoh's presence. When he threw the ashes into the air the fine dust spread over all Egypt, causing festering boils to appear on the skin of humans and animals throughout Egypt. The boils even affected the pharaoh's magicians and they could do nothing to stop it.

Despite the boils the pharaoh still refused to let the Israelites leave Egypt.

Lord Yahweh told Moses to go back to the pharaoh the next morning and tell him that if he still refuses then he will send the heaviest hail that has ever fallen on Egypt and that if the Egyptians don't put their animals in a safe and secure shelter they will be killed by the hail. Every person or animal left in the open will die.

Many of the pharaoh's officials hurried to get their slaves and livestock to a secure shelter, but some did not take Moses seriously and left their slaves and their livestock in the fields. Moses pointed his staff toward the sky and the Lord Yahweh sent thunder and hail, and fire came down on the earth. Lightning flashed continually during the heaviest hail storm Egypt had ever seen. The hail struck down everything that was in the open fields throughout all the land of Egypt, both human and animal. It also struck down all the plants of the field, destroyed the crops, and shattered every tree.

Then the pharaoh summoned Moses and Aaron and said to them, "OK, I give up. I have had enough of Yahweh's thunder and hail! I will let you go. I don't want you on my land any longer. I want you to get out of Egypt."

Moses replied, "As soon as I have left the city I will talk to Lord Yahweh. The thunder will cease and there will be no more hail. I think we have demonstrated the Lord Yahweh's power pretty clearly, so I hope you have gotten the message, but I am afraid that you and your officials do not yet really respect our god, the Lord Yahweh."

Moses left the city and he raised his arms toward Lord Yahweh, and the thunder ceased and the rain no longer poured down

from the sky. When the pharaoh saw that the rain and the hail and the thunder had ceased, the Lord Yahweh caused him to change his mind again and become stubborn, and so once again he refused to let the Israelites leave.

People long ago believed in magic. Anything they could not explain, which was most everything out of the ordinary that happened, was the result of the actions of gods.

The plagues described are all natural events that occur from time to time in Egypt, from hail and insects that cover the fields and destroy the grain to diseases that affect the body. This story provides a rationale for why these things happen—the gods did it, and in a rational world it must be for something that people had done for which they were being punished by the gods.

DON'T MESS WITH LORD YAHWEH

Lord Yahweh said to Moses, “You must be curious about why I keep playing these games with the pharaoh—first I give him a warning, then I send a plague to get him to let the Israelites leave, he agrees, then I cause him to change his mind, then I send more warnings and more plagues. Moses, I am deliberately making fools of the pharaoh and the Egyptian people. Every time the pharaoh changes his mind gives me another opportunity to show my power. You can tell your children and grandchildren what fools I made of the Egyptians with my power. I wanted to show them that I, the Lord Yahweh, can do very powerful things so they will learn not to mess with me.”

“So,” the Lord Yahweh continued, “go back to the pharaoh tomorrow. Tell him that the Lord Yahweh is going to send a plague of locusts to Egypt if he does not let the Hebrew people leave. The locusts will cover the land, they will eat everything not already destroyed by the hail, they will destroy the remnants of any tree still standing, they will fill all the houses. It will be worse than any tragedy their parents and grandparents have seen.”

Moses warned the pharaoh that the plague of locusts was coming. After Moses had left, the pharaoh’s advisors tried to convince the pharaoh that this problem with Moses and his god had been going on long enough. He needed to let the Israelites leave Egypt. Egypt was ruined and could not take any more punishment.

After he thought about it for awhile, the pharaoh called Moses and Aaron back to his palace and asked them how many of the

Israelites intended to go on this trip to the wilderness to make sacrifices to the Lord Yahweh.

“All of them. Everyone is leaving,” said Moses, “the young and the old, our sons and daughters, our flocks and our herds. We are all going to celebrate Lord Yahweh’s festival in the wilderness.”

“That’s not going to happen,” said the pharaoh. “The women and children have to remain here. Your men can go and make sacrifices to the Lord Yahweh. You don’t need the women and children to do that. I’m not going to let them leave. It’s obvious that you have some other purpose for taking everyone with you. I suspect you are not planning to return.”

The pharaoh then ordered Moses and Aaron to leave his palace.

Lord Yahweh told Moses to raise his hands toward the sky. Immediately an east wind began blowing and it continued all day and all night. By morning the east wind had brought a swarm of locusts that covered the land until it was black with them. They ate all the plants and all the fruit on the trees that the hail had left. Nothing green was left, no tree, no plant in all the land of Egypt.

The pharaoh’s magicians could not make the locusts go away so the pharaoh hurriedly summoned Moses and Aaron and said, as expected, "OK. You can go.—but ask your god the Lord Yahweh to get rid of the locusts.”

Moses asked Lord Yahweh to make the locusts go away, and immediately a very strong west wind arose that drove the locusts into the Red Sea, so that not a single locust was left in all the country of Egypt.

However the Lord Yahweh was not through tormenting the pharaoh, so after Moses left Yahweh caused the pharaoh to change his mind again and once more the pharaoh would not let the Israelites leave the country.

Lord Yahweh then told Moses to lift his hands toward the sky as he had done previously. Immediately a dense darkness descended over all of the land of Egypt except where the Israelites lived. The darkness lasted for three days and was so dense that people could not see one another and for three days they could not move from where they were.

Then the pharaoh summoned Moses and told him that the Israelites could go into the desert for religious ceremonies and they could take their children with them but they must leave their flocks and herds at home in Egypt. Moses told the pharaoh that those conditions were not acceptable because the Israelites needed to offer sacrifices and burnt offerings to Lord Yahweh from their livestock and they would not know what they needed until they got into the desert and Lord Yahweh told them what he wanted. So, said Moses, all the livestock must go with them.

Lord Yahweh once again caused the pharaoh to resist what Moses demanded, so the pharaoh refused to let the Israelites leave. He was so mad at Moses that he told him very firmly to get out of his presence and not to come back to see him again, because if the pharaoh saw him again, he would have him executed.

Moses replied, "That's fine with me! You will never see me again."

While the Lord Yahweh is mean-spirited and cruel in this story, there is a larger purpose. In a later period, when they were attempting to write out their history, the Israelites remembered from their traditions a number of facts that had to be reconciled—their awareness that they were made up of different tribes with different traditions and different gods yet sharing a common origin as desert nomads and a memory of having been in Egypt but not originating there. They also remembered plagues of locusts and violent storms and attributed these occurrences to the gods. These stories take these pieces of their memory of their past history and weave them into a tapestry to try to explain their complicated past.

PASSOVER AND THE ANGEL OF DEATH

Lord Yahweh told Moses that he was going to bring one last plague on the Egyptians that would have such devastating impact that the pharaoh will not only let the Israelites go, he will literally drive them away with gifts.

Moses went to the pharaoh and said: "The Lord Yahweh told me that at midnight he is going to go throughout all Egypt and kill the first born child in every family, from the eldest son of the pharaoh to the first born child of the most insignificant female slave. There will be a loud outcry of anguish from the people across the land such as never was heard before. You will beg me to leave with my people."

The pharaoh was furious. They argued. The pharaoh refused to let the Israelites leave his country, so Moses left white hot with anger.

The Lord Yahweh said to Moses: "You should not be surprised that he refused to let the people go. By now you must have realized that I caused the pharaoh to refuse precisely so that I would have a good reason to carry out my threat to kill the first born of the land."

"Listen carefully. For the safety of the people you must follow these instructions exactly. Gather together all the people and tell them that this afternoon each family must obtain a one year old male lamb, slaughter it by slitting its throat at twilight, drain the blood into a pail, then take some of the blood and rub it on the door posts of their house. Then they must roast the lamb over the fire and eat it for dinner tonight with unleavened bread and bitter herbs. They must eat hurriedly, fully dressed and ready to leave, with their sandals on and their walking staff in

their hand. All the meat that is left over must be burned in the fire until nothing is left. They must not leave their house this evening.”

“At midnight tonight I will pass through the land of Egypt and I will kill every firstborn child. I will show my power over the gods of Egypt. The blood on the door posts of your houses will protect you. When I see the blood, I will know that Israelites are in the house and I will pass by your houses and spare your lives.”

“This day will be a sacred day of remembrance and you must celebrate it every year down through the generations as the Passover Festival.”

The Israelites followed Moses’ instructions. At midnight the Lord Yahweh passed throughout Egypt and killed the first born in every household, from the first born of the pharaoh to the first born of the prisoners in the dungeon. There was not a household in Egypt without someone dead.

Later that night after he had finished killing the Egyptians the Lord Yahweh summoned Moses and Aaron and said: “Get up. It’s time to go. Wake everyone up. Get your flocks and herds and get going right now. You must hurry.”

As they were leaving they asked their Egyptian neighbors for silver and gold, and for clothing. They plundered their Egyptian neighbors, who were eager to see them go and let them have whatever they wanted.

Then the Israelites started on their journey out of the land of Egypt, about 600,000 of them, together with great numbers of livestock, on a journey to an unknown land.

This story was created many years after the events it describes to provide the narrative on which the later celebration of the Passover Festival is based. Passover is celebrated by Jews all over the world and is one of the most important Jewish traditions.

Lord Yahweh is not an admirable figure in this story. Not only is he responsible for widespread death and destruction but he is extremely cruel and unfair when he threatens the pharaoh with consequences if he does not let the Israelites go but prevents the pharaoh from taking the action that would avoid the consequences. In short, Lord Yahweh was looking for an excuse to display his magical powers at the expense of the Egyptians.

THE GREAT ESCAPE

Moses led the Israelites east out of Egypt and into the desert. The most direct route to Canaan would take them through territory of the Philistines. The Lord Yahweh did not want them to go that way because they would have to fight their way through Philistine territory and he was afraid that if the Israelites faced war so soon after leaving Egypt they might get discouraged and decide it was not worth the effort and they might return to Egypt. So Lord Yahweh led them into the desert wilderness in a roundabout way heading toward the Red Sea.

Lord Yahweh wanted to put as much distance as possible between Egypt and the Israelites, so Lord Yahweh led them onward wrapped in a cloud to point the way during the day and appearing as a pillar of fire to light their way at night.

When they reached the shore of the Red Sea Lord Yahweh told Moses to have the Israelites camp there. He told Moses that he was going to cause the pharaoh to change his mind again by letting him believe that the Israelites were wandering aimlessly in the desert and were lost so that the pharaoh would be encouraged to pursue them and he would once again have an opportunity to show the pharaoh his mighty power. Lord Yahweh told Moses, "I will gain glory for myself by destroying the pharaoh and all his army so that the Egyptians will know that I am the powerful Lord Yahweh."

When the pharaoh was told that the Israelites had left Egypt, he changed his mind again, telling his officers, "We have been foolish to let the Israelites leave. We need them as laborers to build our cities."

The Israelites had a good head start, since it had been several days since they had left Egypt, but they were mostly on foot and

were herding their livestock and flocks with them, so the pharaoh figured it would be pretty easy to catch up with them. He ordered his chariot brought to him and he headed off quickly in pursuit of the Israelites with his army and six hundred specially-equipped war chariots. The Egyptians caught up with the Israelites as they camped by the sea. As the pharaoh got closer the Israelites saw the dust clouds of the chariots fast closing on them and they became frightened. They cried out to Moses in anger and fear that he had led them out into the desert to be slaughtered by the Egyptian army.

But Moses said to the people, "Do not be afraid, stay where you are and watch the power of the Lord Yahweh as he fights the Egyptians for you and destroys them. Settle down. Relax and watch."

Lord Yahweh said to the people, "I am going to lead you across the sea and cause the Egyptians to follow you. Then I will gain glory for myself when I destroy the pharaoh and all his army, his chariots, and his chariot drivers. Then the Egyptians shall know my power."

The messenger of the Lord Yahweh, who had been in front of the Israelites in the cloud, moved to the rear of the long column of Israelites and stood between them and the Egyptian army. The fiery cloud lit up the darkness and kept the two sides apart all night.

Then Moses raised his staff over the sea. As he did so, the Lord Yahweh caused a strong east wind to blow all night, which divided and separated the waters of the Red Sea so that there was a wall of water on each side and dry land on the sea bed between them. He told the Israelites to start walking across the Sea on the dry ground between the walls of water. By morning all the Israelites had crossed to the other side.

The fiery cloud with Yahweh in it then moved to one side so that the Egyptians could pursue the Israelites into the sea. In the morning the Lord Yahweh looked down on the Egyptian army from the pillar of fire above them. He slowed their advance by causing their chariots to bog down in the mud of the sea floor. The Egyptians began to panic. They tried to turn their chariots around but they were stuck deep in the mud.

Lord Yahweh told Moses to raise his arms over the sea and as he did so the wall of water began to collapse around the army and the chariots. The Egyptians tried to get back to the shore but they were tossed around in the cascading waters, which covered the chariots and their drivers. The entire Egyptian army was drowned by the returning waters. The Lord Yahweh lured the Egyptians into chasing after the Israelites, then drowned them to save the Israelites from the Egyptians and to show the Israelites his power. When the waters of the Red Sea had returned to their banks, the Israelites saw thousands of Egyptians floating in the water and many bodies lying on the seashore.

There have been many attempts through the years to explain “what happened” that allowed the Israelites to “escape” from Egypt. While the facts are not knowable it is possible that the story reflects an authentic historical memory of the Hebrew tribes that they had been in Egypt and crossed from there into the desert, perhaps through a shallow ford that caused the heavy Egyptian chariots to bog down.

THE ISRAELITES GO CAMPING

As the bodies of the Egyptian soldiers washed up on the shore, Moses ordered the Israelites to move away from the shore. They gathered their gear and headed deep into the desert wilderness. The Israelites traveled for three days into the Sinai desert but they found no water to drink. They were tired and thirsty but they had to keep moving. On the fourth day they finally found water but it was contaminated and undrinkable.

The people were angry and in their frustration they complained to Moses. "What are we supposed to drink?" they asked. "Good question," thought Moses, so he complained to Lord Yahweh, who pointed out a piece of wood on the ground and told Moses to throw it into the foul smelling water. He did, and immediately the water became fresh and drinkable.

After watering their herds and refilling their water storage containers, they moved on. A few days later they came to an oasis in the desert where there were twelve springs of fresh water and seventy palm trees. They set up their camp at the oasis and remained there for many months. When they needed more grass land for their livestock, they moved on.

The Israelites moved their camp every few months from place to place throughout the desert wilderness of Sinai, living as nomads, tending their livestock, and seeking grasslands and water wherever they could find it. Water was their biggest problem in the desert. While they were at a place called Kadesh the water ran out and the people became increasingly desperate.

When the springs dried up there was no water for people, for livestock, for growing grain or figs, the trees were not bearing fruit and their livestock were dying. They complained to Moses,

blaming him for bringing them into the wilderness with its harsh conditions and lack of water. They did not want to die in the desert.

Moses and Aaron then complained to Lord Yahweh, who told Moses to assemble the people and when they were gathered around him in front of a large rock to command the rock to produce a stream of water.

Moses and Aaron gathered the people together in front of the rock and said to them, "Listen, you complainers and whiners, do you want me to bring water for you out of this rock?" Then Moses took his staff and struck the rock twice and immediately water came out abundantly from the rock. The people and their livestock drank and were satisfied.

Moses words to the people and his action in striking the rock with his staff made Lord Yahweh very angry. He said to Moses and Aaron, "You did not follow my instructions. I told you to *speak* to the rock, but you *struck* the rock with your staff. You must learn to follow my instructions. Because you did not follow my instructions exactly, I will not let you lead the people into the Promised Land. That duty and honor will now fall to your assistant, Joshua. You will remain here in the desert, wandering from oasis to oasis, until the end of your natural life."

"When the time comes many years from now for you to enter the land of Canaan," Lord Yahweh continued, "I am going to send my messenger to lead the way and guide you to the land that I have prepared for you. Listen to my messenger very carefully. Do exactly what he says. Don't argue with him because it will not go well with you if you give him any trouble. If you follow his instructions and do what he says to do, then I will become the enemy of your enemies, and I will destroy the

Amorites, the Hittites, the Canaanites, and all the other people who now live in Canaan.

“However I am warning you that they have their own gods, and you must not acknowledge them, or bow down to them, or sacrifice to them. You must destroy their places of sacrifice. If you are loyal to me, and to me only, I will provide your bread and your water, I will see that you do not get sick or suffer any disease, I will ensure that none of your women miscarry or are unable to bear children, I will give you long life, I will send terror to your enemies and will throw them into confusion, I will send pestilences and disease to the people who now occupy Canaan and they will run from you when they see you coming.

“But you must understand that even with my help your conquest of Canaan will not be quick or easy. It will take many years. I will not drive the current residents out of Canaan in one year—if I drove them out before you were ready to control it, the area will become unstable and the wild animals will increase and cause problems for you. Little by little I will drive them out as you advance through the land and as the number of your people has increased so that you can keep control of the land you occupy.

“Finally, I remind you again that as you conquer the land you must resist the temptation to adopt the religious practices and culture of the people you conquer. Do not sacrifice to their gods or I will be very angry with you, and right now you need me so don’t annoy me further.”

The people subsequently known as the Israelites were made up of several related tribes who had a common interest in moving into Canaan and assimilating with the people who were already there, or displacing them through occupation or conquest. They may have been *habiru* (from which we get *Hebrew*), who are known to have been in Egypt around the time of this story. The escape from Egypt at the change of a dynasty may be a legitimate historical remembrance, passed down in the oral traditions of the Israelites. If this story is partly historical the pharaoh of the Exodus may have been *Rameses II*.

When Lord Yahweh says he will provide the Israelites with “bread and water” in exchange for their loyalty, he means that he will provide them with the essentials necessary for life.

The historical evidence suggests that the “conquest” of Canaan by the Israelites and other nomadic outsiders took place over several hundred years, and while armed conflicts between outsiders and the existing city-states occurred, most of this “invasion” from the desert was peaceful settlement in uninhabited territory between the city-states and then gradual assimilation of the newcomers by existing peoples.

SPY STORY

Moses wasn't the only Israelite to get into serious trouble with Lord Yahweh. A few weeks after the Egyptian army was inundated and destroyed by the waters of the Red Sea, Lord Yahweh told Moses to send a party of military scouts into Canaan to find a good place for the Israelites to settle.

The scouts were gone for several weeks. When they eventually returned they reported back to Moses that they had found several good spots in Canaan where they could settle but the place they liked best was not in Canaan, it was on the east side of the Jordan River. The land there was fertile with lush green pasture and water for their sheep and goats. Moses and his military advisors agreed that there was no need to invade Canaan, which looked like an unnecessarily difficult challenge, when they could occupy good land east of Canaan without the need for military conquest. The people agreed.

Lord Yahweh was furious when he heard that the Israelites did not intend to invade Canaan. He wanted the Israelites to send their army into battle to win great heroic victories over the Canaanite cities. A spectacular series of victories over the cities and their gods would enhance Lord Yahweh's reputation as the most powerful god in the region. Cities all over Canaan would hear that he was a powerful war god and they would be afraid as the Israelites advanced through Canaan. The decision by Moses and his military officers not to invade Canaan fouled up Lord Yahweh's plans and made him very angry.

Lord Yahweh went to see Moses to tell him how angry he was that the people wanted to settle peacefully in the land east of the Jordan River to avoid having to fight the Canaanites. In fact Lord Yahweh was so angry with Moses and his soldiers that he told Moses that as punishment for not following his instructions

not only would he not get into the Promised Land, none of his soldiers would get into the Promised Land either. They would have to wander around the wilderness of the Sinai Desert for many years until that generation of leaders was dead.

Time passed slowly for the Israelites, who had to struggle to survive, but eventually after forty years Moses and all the men of military age at the time of the exodus from Egypt had died. Joshua, Moses' deputy, became their new leader. There was now a new generation of Israelites and it was time now to move on.

Lord Yahweh met with Joshua and told him to get his people ready in three days to cross the Jordan River and begin the invasion of Canaan. All of the land of Canaan from the Mediterranean Sea east to Mesopotamia, as far north as the territory of the Hittites and as far south as Sinai, was to be their new land, a gift from Lord Yahweh, who would help them defeat and destroy all the cities of Canaan.

In return for a guarantee of victory the Israelites were to be brave, act courageously and obey the dozens of laws and ceremonial rituals that Lord Yahweh had given to them during their forty years of wandering in the barren desert wilderness. Anyone who did not obey all Lord Yahweh's laws and follow his orders without question would be executed.

Their first objective was the city of Jericho, which was a few miles away almost directly across the Jordan River. Joshua sent two spies to Jericho to investigate the defenses of the city. In those days prostitutes often sat outside city gates to offer their professional services and their hospitality to strangers arriving at the city. The spies needed a room for the night, so they accepted the offer of hospitality from a local prostitute named Rahab.

Agents of the king of Jericho heard that strangers were in town. Since the strangers did not bring trade goods and did not appear to be typical business travelers, the king's agents suspected that the strangers were spies.

Rahab knew that agents soon would come by to check on the strangers, so she hid the two men on the roof of her house and covered with them with flax that she had laid out to dry after cutting it in the fields earlier in the day. She admitted to the king's agents that two strangers had been to her house, but she told them that the men had already left, and she did not know where they had come from or where they had gone. She suggested that if the agents hurried they might be able to catch the strangers before they got away. The agents ordered the city gates shut and rushed off in pursuit of the strangers, going as far as the shallow fords across the Jordan River.

Later that evening after it had gotten dark, Rahab went up on her roof to talk to the strangers. She told them that she knew they were Israelites. She had heard about how Lord Yahweh had drowned the Egyptian army. She had heard about the massacres of people in the towns and villages of the desert. She told the strangers that the people of Jericho and other cities of Canaan were very scared because Lord Yahweh was so powerful and so destructive. She agreed to help the men escape in exchange for her life and the lives of her family when the Israelites invaded and conquered Jericho.

The strangers promised Rahab that if she kept quiet about who they were and why they were in Jericho, and if she helped them escape, the Israelites would spare her life and the lives of her family. Rahab and the strangers developed a plan to keep Rahab and her family safe. When the attack came Rahab was to gather all the members of her family into her house, then lower a

crimson rope out the window to mark her house so that the Israelites would not bother them.

Rahab's house was located directly on the city wall. After the spies had finished working out the details of her rescue, Rahab lowered the strangers from her window with a rope. She told them to head for the hill country away from the river and to hide in the hills for three days until the men looking for them had given up and returned to the city.

It did not take long for the men of Jericho to give up searching and return to their city. In a few days the spies left the hills and went back across the Jordan River. They reported back to Joshua what they had seen and heard. Joshua was excited when he heard that the inhabitants of the cities around Jericho were afraid of the Israelites. That led him to conclude that the time had come to cross the Jordan River and begin the invasion of Canaan with an attack on Jericho.

Hospitality was important to tribal peoples in the Middle East. It was customary for the head of a household to offer visitors a woman of his household as a bed companion. The prostitute carried this one logical step further by providing visitors a bed and breakfast with benefits.

Neither the Israelites nor the Canaanites had a standing professional army. Soldiers were men of military age, roughly ages 18 to 40, who fought for their people when necessary.

THE BATTLE OF JERICHO

Joshua ordered the people to pack up their tents and get ready to march. The next morning they gathered their herds of sheep and goats and headed toward the Jordan River. It was late afternoon when they reached the shore of the river, so they set up their camp along the river bank at a place where the river was shallow enough to cross. The Israelites remained there for several days while Joshua and his officers planned their battle strategy.

Three days later military officers went through the tent city telling the people that the time for the attack had come. The signal for the people to start crossing the river would be the appearance of the “ark of the covenant” carried by priests. When the ark appeared, the people were to follow behind it at a respectful distance.

The next morning Joshua ordered the priests to carry the ark down to the river and to stand in the shallow water close to shore. As soon as the priests stepped into the water the river stopped flowing and dry land appeared where the river had been flowing moments before. The Israelites crossed the river and on the other side stepped onto the land of Canaan. When everyone had crossed the river the priests carried the ark to the other side, and as soon as they stepped out of the water onto land the waters of the river began to flow again.

News that the Jordan River had stopped flowing while the Israelites were crossing quickly spread throughout Canaan. The kings of the many city-states in Canaan were impressed by this miracle but were also troubled by the strange power the Israelites had and quickly they became afraid as they realized that the Israelites were coming to conquer them.

The Israelites set up their camp on the Canaanite side of the River. Jericho was quite close to the Israelite camp but no one from Jericho came out of the city to stop them. Since there was no military opposition, Joshua sent his soldiers to surround the city and put Jericho under siege. No one could get past the troops to come in or out of the city, so they could not get new supplies of food. Joshua was going to starve them out or wait to attack until the people of the city were too weak to fight. It would take a long time. The Israelites settled down to wait them out.

One afternoon Joshua went out for a walk in the hot desert sun. On the path that led toward Jericho he met a man standing ahead of him with his sword drawn and apparently ready to strike. Joshua asked him, "Are you one of us or one of our enemies?"

The stranger told Joshua, "Neither. I am the commander of Lord Yahweh's army."

"So what do you want me to do?" asked Joshua. The commander of the army of Lord Yahweh replied, "Take your shoes off—the place you are standing on is my holy land. Then listen to me."

Joshua did as he was told.

"The city of Jericho will fall. You will capture its king and its soldiers, but not the way you planned. I have a different plan for victory, a bit more dramatic and a lot quicker than the customary siege. Here is what you must do," said the commander. "Follow these instructions exactly."

"Every day, for the next six days, your soldiers are to march around the city walls one time. Seven priests each blowing a ram's horn are to march immediately behind the soldiers,

followed by the Ark of the Covenant. The rest of the people are to follow behind the Ark.

“On the seventh day you must march around the city seven times—the soldiers, the priests, and the people. The priests must blow their trumpets. During the march the people are to be absolutely silent. They may not speak a word. The only sound must be the rams’ horns. After everyone has marched around the city walls seven times the priests are to blow one long blast on their rams’ horns. When they hear that blast all the people are to shout as loudly as they can. The walls of the city will fall down at the sound. Immediately everyone is to run forward to attack the city, the soldiers and the rest of the people.”

Joshua called the people to a meeting and gave them their instructions, repeating them just as they were given to him by Lord Yahweh’s military commander. He told them that Lord Yahweh wanted the city of Jericho, its people and everything in the city destroyed—they were being sacrificed as an act of devotion to Lord Yahweh. The Israelites were not to take anything out of the city for themselves. They were to destroy everything—or almost everything.

There were two important exceptions to the destruction order. First, all the silver and gold in the city, and all metal objects, anything made of bronze and iron, was to be saved from destruction and given as a gift to Lord Yahweh, and deposited into his treasury which, of course, was to be in the custody of the priests. Second, Rahab the prostitute and all her family were to be saved from destruction because she had protected the Israelite spies that had been sent Jericho.

For six days the strange procession marched around Jericho. Then on the seventh day the Israelites marched around the city

seven times. After the priests blew a long blast on the trumpet, Joshua told the people to shout as loud as they could. They did. The walls of the city collapsed. Everyone charged the city and they captured it easily. After it was captured, the Israelites destroyed men, women and children, whether young or old, as well as oxen, sheep and donkeys. The soldiers of Yahweh fought with them and helped with the destruction. Everything and everyone was destroyed. The two spies located Rahab; they led her and her family safely out of the city and took them to the Israelite camp. Then the Israelites burned down the city.

Joshua's vicious destruction of Jericho made him instantly famous—and, of course, feared—throughout Canaan.

The "ark of the covenant" was a large gold-covered ceremonial wooden chest containing laws written down in Moses' time. It had both political and religious significance and was often carried into battle as a symbol of the presence of Lord Yahweh.

ACHAN GETS STONED

Jericho had been conquered easily and word of Joshua's victory quickly spread through Canaan. Joshua was eager to take advantage of his momentum and the Canaanites' fear, so he decided to move ahead quickly to his next objective. He sent military scouts to check out the defenses of Ai, the next closest city, only a few miles from Jericho. The scouts returned quickly and told Joshua that the city of Ai was small and did not have strong defenses. They told Joshua that he did not need to send the whole army to conquer Ai, he could defeat the city with two or three thousand troops.

Joshua sent three thousand soldiers to attack Ai and put them under the command of one of his senior officers. Joshua had decided to remain in camp with the rest of the army.

Just as the Israelites were starting their initial assault on Ai they were surprised when the men of the city suddenly came rushing out from the city gates and counter-attacked the Israelites. Joshua's troops were caught by surprise and ran from the men of Ai, who chased them as far as the slopes of a nearby hill, killing 36 of the Israelite troops as they ran and wounding many others.

The army limped back to their camp in disarray. The Israelites were stunned when they heard the news of their defeat. They had expected an easy victory and they became frightened. Something was terribly wrong. Lord Yahweh had promised them victory over the Canaanites, yet they had just lost what should have been an easy battle. Joshua was very upset at their defeat and angry with Lord Yahweh. Joshua said, "Lord Yahweh! Why did you lead us across the Jordan River and promise us easy victory, and then let us be defeated by the Amorites? Do you want to destroy us? We should have settled down in the fertile

land on the other side of the Jordan River, as our scouts suggested many years ago.

“I am humiliated and upset. When the Canaanites hear that our men turned and ran like cowards in our battle against the small city of Ai they will no longer be afraid of us. They will come after us and destroy us. What good is the great name of Yahweh if you could not protect us from our enemies?”

When he heard Joshua’s moaning Lord Yahweh burned with anger. “Joshua, I ordered you to destroy everything in Jericho except for the precious metals, which were mine and which were to be put into my treasury,” Yahweh said. “But someone among the Israelites took some things for himself. Someone among you has disobeyed my instructions. Someone has stolen what did not belong to him and has acted deceitfully by concealing the stolen goods among their own possessions. Since whoever it was did not destroy what I had ordered to be destroyed, then they will be destroyed. I will not help you any more unless you destroy the things that I had ordered destroyed.”

“Here is what you must do to fix this problem so you can have my support in future battles. In the morning you are to bring all the tribes before me, one at a time. I will select the guilty tribe with a throw of the dice. Then the clans of that tribe will come before me and the guilty clan will be selected by a throw of the dice. Finally each household of that clan will stand before me, and the guilty household will be selected by a throw of the dice. When I have determined the guilty household you must kill all members of that household, and destroy everything taken from Jericho in violation of my orders and all the possessions of that household. You must burn everything and everyone until only ashes remain.

The next morning the process to determine the guilty household got underway. First the tribe was selected, then the clan, until finally it came down to the household of Achan. Joshua demanded that Achan confess what he had done. Achan admitted that during the battle at Jericho he had taken a beautiful Babylonian robe, two hundred shekels of silver and a bar of gold weighing fifty shekels and had hidden them in the ground under his tent.

Joshua sent agents to locate the stolen merchandise. They returned with everything just as Achan had described and spread it on the ground in front of Lord Yahweh. Joshua arrested Achan and took him, his sons and daughters, his sheep and oxen, his donkeys and his tent, and everything else he owned, and marched them outside the camp to the Valley of Achor. Joshua pronounced the sentence of death on Achan, telling him that just as he had brought trouble to the Israelite people, trouble had now come back to him. They buried him in the ground so that just his head was above the ground, then the Israelites took stones and stoned him to death. His family was killed, along with all his animals. Then they burned everything, people, animals and possessions in a large fire and then covered the ashes under a pile of rocks.

Lord Yahweh was satisfied and his burning anger against the Israelites subsided.

Decisions about guilt or innocence in ancient times were sometimes left to “casting lots,” a game of chance, the mechanics of which are not understood but are believed to involve throwing of marked sticks, similar to throwing dice, based on the belief that the god would determine the outcome, whether guilt or innocence.

Canaanites is a generic term that refers to any of the many people who lived in the territory of Canaan during this era. Many different tribes lived in Canaan at the time the Israelites entered the land—Amorites, Hittites, Jebusites, etc.

AMBUSH AT AI

Lord Yahweh was no longer angry with Joshua now that he had executed Achan for taking forbidden items from Jericho. He was willing to help the Israelites defeat the city of Ai. This time, Lord Yahweh told Joshua, after the soldiers capture Ai and burn it down they can keep all the booty they capture for themselves—goods and livestock. This time the Israelites are to use all 30,000 of their soldiers to set up an ambush to trap the soldiers of Ai.

Joshua set out that night with part of his army. They advanced under cover of darkness and took positions behind the city, where they waited quietly for the signal to spring the trap on Ai. After the soldiers were in position, Joshua went back to his camp to wait for daylight.

At sunrise Joshua and the rest of his army advanced toward Ai. They moved into position just north of the city and set up their camp at the top of a ravine that separated them from Ai. The king of Ai saw the Israelites setting up camp across the ravine from his city and determined that it was a good time to launch an attack. The soldiers of Ai emerged from the city and headed rapidly toward the Israelites, who ran as they did before as soon as they saw the soldiers of Ai charging in their direction, but this time Joshua's men headed toward the wilderness. When the soldiers of Ai reached the wilderness, the rest of Joshua's army, which had been waiting out of sight behind the city, came out of hiding and rushed into the city through the main gate, which the men of Ai had left open. The Israelites set the city ablaze.

By the time the soldiers of Ai saw the fire and smoke the city was already burning and it was too late for them to do anything about it. Joshua raised his sword and gave the command to attack. The Israelite soldiers, who had been retreating, suddenly stopped and turned to engage the soldiers of Ai in battle. The

main Israelite army then emerged from Ai and rushed to attack the soldiers of Ai from the rear, trapping them between the two groups of Israelite soldiers. After the Israelites finished killing the soldiers of Ai in the wilderness, they headed to Ai to kill the men, women and children who had remained in the city. They kept killing until everyone was dead.

The king of Ai was captured alive and brought to Joshua. Joshua ordered him hanged from a nearby tree where he was left hanging until sunset. Then Joshua ordered his body to be taken down and laid in front of the smoldering ruins of the city and stones piled on it as a memorial of the day's events.

It was a total victory for the Israelites. All 12,000 of the inhabitants of Ai were killed and the city was burned to the ground. The soldiers took whatever they could carry, and herded the livestock, back to their camp. When they got back to their camp they built a new altar of stones and sacrificed burnt offerings to the Lord Yahweh in thanks for giving them a great victory.

The Israelites did not take prisoners in the earliest days of their conquest of the land. They believed in total war and they destroyed their enemies without mercy. Their god, the Lord Yahweh, was a warrior god who demanded absolute loyalty, total victory and death to his enemies.

CUNNING NEIGHBORS TRICK JOSHUA

Joshua's reputation as a conquering hero spread rapidly throughout the land of Canaan, from the hill country to the lowlands along the coast of the Great Sea. The kings of the various city-states of Canaan were worried as they heard the tales of Israelite conquest. Fear is a great motivator. The kings decided to set aside their differences and petty quarrels to form an alliance against their fearsome opponent.

The leaders of the nearby city-state of Gibeon, who figured they were on the short list of cities to be attacked next, considered what had happened to Jericho and Ai and were not willing to take their chances in armed conflict with the Israelites. Gibeon was a large city, much larger than the cities around it and considered one of the royal cities of Canaan. All its men were warriors. They had a reputation as tough fighters, but they were not willing to take a chance against Joshua and his god, the Lord Yahweh. They and their allies in a few other nearby cities decided on a different approach—trickery rather than conflict.

They were cunning. They assembled household items to make it appear as if they had been on a long journey. They gathered bread that had become dry and moldy. They collected old worn-out pack blankets for their donkeys, and wineskins that were worn-out, torn and mended. They put worn-out, patched sandals on their feet and dressed themselves in worn-out clothes. They knew that Joshua did not know much about the geography of Canaan and they guessed that he would be easy to fool.

They went to see Joshua at his camp at Gilgal and said to him, "We have come from a far country. We have heard about your reputation. As a distant neighbor we think it would be good to

have a treaty of peace with you. So how about you make a treaty with us, so we can live in peace together?”

Joshua had no idea who they were. None of his advisors had heard of Gibeon. He asked the strangers where they had come from. They told Joshua they had come from far away. They had heard about the reputation of Joshua’s people and his god, the Lord Yahweh. They knew that Lord Yahweh had destroyed the Egyptian army to help them escape from Egypt and that he had helped the Israelites kill several kings and destroy cities and towns in their years of living in the Sinai desert.

Their spokesman told Joshua, “Our elders and all the inhabitants of our country said to us that we should take food for our journey and go to meet you and tell you that we respect you. We are your humble servants, and we want a treaty with you. Look at our bread—it was still warm when we took it from our houses as our food for the journey on the day we left home to come to you, but as you can see, it is now dry and moldy. Our wineskins were new when we filled them but as you can see they are now worn and patched. Look at our clothes and sandals, which are worn out from our long journey.”

The leaders of the Israelites were convinced and believed the strangers had come from a long distance. Nobody thought to check with Lord Yahweh. So Joshua made peace with the Gibeonites and guaranteed their lives by a treaty. When the treaty was signed, the leaders of the Israelites swore an oath to guarantee the treaty and the lives of the Gibeonites.

Three days later they were surprised to hear that the strangers were their neighbors and were living close by. The Israelites were angry about being tricked so they set out with their army to confront Gibeon and the other cities of their alliance. After reaching Gibeon Joshua held his army and did not give the order

to attack. Most of the people wanted to attack, but the leaders reminded them that they had sworn an oath to uphold a treaty of peace and they could not kill the Gibeonites. After some discussion the Israelites decided that the people of the cities that had tricked them into the treaty would become their servants as punishment for their deception.

Joshua called the leaders of the cities of the alliance and said to them, “Why did you deceive us by telling us you were from a far country when you were actually living quite close by and were actually our neighbors? So, since you tricked us and we have sworn an oath to let you live, we will keep our oath and we will not kill you. Instead you will become our servants. You will cut our wood and draw our water for us.”

They replied to Joshua, “We did what we had to do. We had heard that your god, the Lord Yahweh, had given you our land and had ordered you to kill all the inhabitants of the land so you could have it for yourselves. We feared for our lives and we decided to trick you into letting us live. We made our decision to do what we believe was in our best interest and now we are in your hands. Do whatever you want, but just don’t kill us.”

Joshua then ordered they be taken as servants, to serve the people, to serve Lord Yahweh at his altar, and to fight alongside the Israelites as allies when necessary.

Treaties and oaths were considered sacred obligations. Once made they were inviolable and could not be broken. They were made in front of, and guaranteed by, their gods and if broken the gods were expected to punish whoever broke a treaty or a sworn oath. It was not honor that kept treaties and oaths from being broken, it was fear.

THE CONFEDERACY ATTACKS GIBEON

There were five Amorite city-states in Canaan that had formed a confederation for their protection—Jerusalem, Hebron, Jarmuth, Lachish, and Eglon. Adonizedek, king of Jerusalem, had heard about the Israelite conquest of Jericho and Ai. He had also heard about the trickery by Gibeon and its allies and that they had been made servants by the Israelites. He was frightened because he knew that Gibeon had a strong army, yet was unwilling to take its chances in battle with the Israelites.

Adonizedek sent a message to the other kings of the confederacy. He told them that he wanted their help in a joint attack on Gibeon and its allies to punish them for making a peace treaty with the Israelites. He wanted to make a point that any city that did not fight against the Israelites would be attacked by the Amorites because all the city-states of Canaan had to stand together against the Israelites or they would be picked off one at a time.

The other kings agreed and sent their armies to join Adonizedek. The joint army marched to Gibeon and began their attack. The Gibeonites sent an urgent message to Joshua, “We need help. We are under attack by the Amorites, who live in the hill country in the south of Canaan. They have sent a confederation army against us. We are your servants and you have a duty to protect us.”

Joshua consulted Lord Yahweh, who told him not to fear the confederation, they will be defeated. So Joshua assembled his army and they marched all night toward the city of Gibeon. He arrived in the morning and immediately attacked the Amorite army in the rear. The Amorites were caught off guard and were thrown into a panic. The Israelites slaughtered them as they ran. As they fled the advancing Israelite troops down a slope, Lord

Yahweh personally joined the attack. He threw down huge rocks from the heavens onto the Amorite soldiers, killing more Amorites than were killed by the Israelites.

The battle was still raging as dusk fell. Afraid that some of the Amorites would escape in the coming darkness, Joshua asked Lord Yahweh to intercede, then he said out loud in the hearing of the Israelites: "Sun, stand still over Gibeon." The sun stopped moving across the sky and did not move again for an entire day, giving the Israelites enough light to take vengeance on their enemies and destroy them.

After the Israelites destroyed all the Amorite soldiers they could find, Joshua and the bulk of his army returned to their camp. Some of the Amorites had managed to escape and were trying to get back to their cities. The five kings of the confederation had managed to evade capture. Joshua had soldiers looking for them and they eventually found the kings hiding in a cave. The soldiers stood guard while they sent back word to Joshua that they had found the kings and asked what to do with them. Joshua ordered that large stones be rolled against the mouth of the cave to keep the kings imprisoned and that guards should remain there to ensure they did not escape.

The remaining soldiers were ordered to hunt down and kill any Amorites who had escaped the battle. They hunted down and slaughtered many of the Amorites but despite their determined efforts some of the Amorites managed to reach their cities. The Israelite soldiers then returned back to their camp.

Joshua sent soldiers to roll back the stones from the mouth of the cave and bring the Amorite kings to him. The soldiers returned the next day with the five kings as their prisoners. Joshua called the Israelites to assemble for a general meeting the next morning, and after they were assembled he forced the

five kings to lie on the ground and told the Israelites to take turns putting their feet on the necks of the kings. “Do not be afraid of your enemies,” he told the people. “Be strong, for Lord Yahweh will put the necks of all our enemies under your feet, just as he has put the necks of these kings under your feet.”

While the kings were lying on the ground Joshua took his sword and executed them. He ordered their bodies to be hung from the branches of nearby trees until evening. At sunset he ordered the bodies taken down from the trees and transported back to the cave where they had hidden from the Israelites. Their bodies were dumped into the cave and huge rocks were put at the mouth of the cave to seal its entrance and to serve as a memorial of their resistance to the Israelite army.

Then, on instructions from Lord Yahweh, Joshua ordered his army to attack each of the five cities in turn and kill everyone in the cities without exception. Lord Yahweh had caused the defenders in each of the cities to fight against the Israelite soldiers so there would be an excuse for them to be destroyed without mercy. His plan worked and all the inhabitants were exterminated, as Lord Yahweh had commanded.

The description of the conquest of Canaan in the biblical book of Joshua makes it appear as if the conquest occurred in a very short time by force of arms. No doubt some cities were taken in battle, but historians believe that it is more likely that most of the cities of Canaan were gradually assimilated rather than conquered, that the subjugation actually took several hundred years, and that oral tradition exaggerated the military prowess of the Israelites and conflated long periods of time in the telling.

The first of the “10 Commandments” does not say, contrary to popular belief, that there is only one god. It actually says “you shall not have any other gods *before* (i.e., more important than) me. This is not *monotheism* (the belief in one god) but *monolatry* (the worship of one primary god, while allowing for the existence of other gods). As the paragraph says, Lord Yahweh is a jealous god who does not want any other god getting more attention than he gets. Lord Yahweh is also vindictive, cruel and mean-spirited.

WOMEN WIN THE WAR

Many years had passed. During those long years the Israelites had gradually taken control of most of the land of Canaan, sometimes by assimilating with the native tribes by living among them and marrying their women, and sometimes by conquest and destruction. The Israelites began to adopt the local customs of Canaan, including adopting some of their religious practices which included worshipping agricultural and fertility gods.

Lord Yahweh was not happy about the competition. He had already told the Israelites that as part of his arrangement with them, he would only be their protector if the Israelites accepted him as their chief god and so long as they had no other gods that were more important than him. The Israelites were not living up to their part of the bargain and were beginning to ignore Lord Yahweh, so Lord Yahweh sold the Israelites to Jabin, King of Hazor, to teach them a lesson.

The commander of Jabin's army was Sisera. His army was large and powerful. He had thousands of soldiers, and he also had 900 iron chariots, the battle tanks of the day. For 20 years the Israelites had been under the control of Sisera, who was a cruel and oppressive tyrant. For those same 20 years various leaders of the Israelite tribes had reminded the people that they had wandered away from the worship of Lord Yahweh and they were now paying the price for irritating him. Finally the abuse under Sisera got so bad that they began to beg Lord Yahweh for his help in overcoming Sisera's tyrannical control over them.

Deborah was a wise woman and a prophetess. She was believed to have connections with Lord Yahweh. She sat under a palm tree in the hill country and settled local disputes as a justice of the peace. People from all over the land heard about her wisdom and fair judgment and began to come to her for advice.

One day a group of Israelites came to her and asked her how they could get rid of Sisera.

Deborah told them to bring Barak, from the tribe of Naphtali, to her. When Barak arrived she said to him, "The Lord Yahweh, the god of the Israelites, commands you to gather 10,000 men from your tribe of Naphtali and from the tribe of Zebulun, and set up a defensive position at Mount Tabor. The Lord Yahweh will draw out Sisera, the general of King Jabin's army, and cause him to bring his chariots and his troops to meet your army at the Wadi Kishon, and there Lord Yahweh will give you victory over him."

Barak said to her, "I will only do this if you go with me. If you don't go with me, I will not go."

Deborah replied, "OK, I will go with you as you ask. However you need to know that the road you travel will lead to Sisera's destruction but it will not lead to your glory, for the Lord Yahweh will cause Sisera to be killed by the hand of a woman."

Barak assembled 10,000 men from the two tribes, and together with Deborah, they marched to Mount Tabor and set up their defenses on high ground. When Sisera heard that an army of Israelites had been assembled to challenge his rule, he immediately called up his 900 chariots and assembled his army and marched toward Mount Tabor.

As she saw Sisera's army approach Deborah said to Barak, "Attack now, while Sisera is not expecting it. This is the day that Lord Yahweh is going to give Sisera to you. Lord Yahweh will march with you to defeat Sisera."

So Barak attacked down the slope of Mount Tabor with his 10,000 troops, catching Sisera off guard. Sisera's chariots and his army turned in panic and ran into each other trying to get away from the Israelites, causing a traffic jam that made the

chariots useless. Sisera got down from his chariot and escaped on foot while his soldiers were being hunted down and slaughtered by Barak's men.

Sisera came across the camp of his ally, Heber the Kenite, where he was met by Heber's wife Jael at the entrance to her tent. Jael told Sisera, "Welcome, my friend. You can stay here, where you will be safe."

Sisera asked Jael for water since he was thirsty. She opened a skin bag of fresh milk and gave it to him to drink. Then Sisera lay down for a nap. As Jael covered him with a blanket, he asked her to stand guard at the entrance of the tent and, if anyone came by and asked if he was here, to tell them no, she was alone.

As soon as Sisera fell asleep, weary from the battle and his escape, Jael took a sharpened tent peg and jammed it into his temple and then took a hammer and drove the peg through his skull into the ground.

Barak and his men soon came by looking for Sisera and Jael went out to meet him, telling him that Sisera was in her tent, where Barak found him dead with the tent peg in his temple.

In the ancient near east, particularly in the patriarchal tribal society of the Hebrew people, women generally had a limited and subservient role. Occasionally we are surprised and delighted that women are shown in significant leadership roles, as in this story about Deborah and Jael.

The Israelites were a loose group of related patriarchal tribes. There was no central governing body, no king, no national leader other than a few legendary figures such as Moses and Joshua. In times of common need informal heroic leaders (called “Judges”) came to wider attention outside their local tribes, probably for their personal skills in arbitration of disputes and their leadership in times of crisis.

THE BIRTH OF A SAVIOR

The Israelites got into trouble again with Lord Yahweh because they had ignored some of his rules, ritual sacrifices and burnt offerings. Lord Yahweh was quite annoyed with the Israelites so to punish them he caused the Israelites to be defeated in a series of battles and eventually subjugated by the Philistines, a tribal group that had settled along the Mediterranean coast of Canaan and had created a powerful city-state there.

After the Israelites had been under the domination of their Philistine neighbors for forty years Lord Yahweh decided that the Israelites had been punished enough. He sent a messenger to the wife of Manoah, a member of the tribe of Dan, whose name was Hatzlelponi (but we will call her Hattie because Hatzlelponi is too hard to pronounce). She had been unable to conceive any children. The messenger told Hattie that shortly she would become pregnant and give birth to a son but warned her that while she was pregnant she was not to drink any wine or other alcoholic drinks or eat any food that was considered by the priests to be ritually impure and therefore unfit for human consumption. Hattie's son was to be raised as a special child because he was dedicated to Lord Yahweh from birth, that as a sign of that dedication he was never to shave or cut his hair, and that when he was an adult he would become the savior Yahweh had selected to destroy the Philistines and rescue the Israelites from their long domination.

Hattie was surprised by the words of the mysterious stranger and a bit apprehensive, so she went to her husband and told him that a man had come to her who had said he was a messenger sent from Lord Yahweh and told her that she would become pregnant with a son who was to be dedicated for life to Lord Yahweh. Hattie told her husband that she had been told not to drink wine or beer or to eat anything on the list of prohibited

foods. She told her husband that she did not ask the man where he had come from and he did not tell her his name but she said that the encounter with the stranger was awe-inspiring.

Manoah asked Hattie, "So, where is this guy you talked to? I want to meet him."

Hattie then led her husband to the spot where the strange man had approached her, but the man was gone. So Manoah pleaded with Lord Yahweh to send back the man to tell them how to raise this special child. Lord Yahweh heard Manoah's pleading, but ignored him.

Later when Hattie was back in the field working by herself the man who claimed to be a messenger of Yahweh came up to her again. Frightened, Hattie ran quickly to her husband and told him that the man had returned, so Manoah quickly returned to the field with Hattie. The stranger was there waiting for them. Manoah said to the stranger, "Are you the man who spoke to my wife about her having a child?"

"I am," he replied.

"So," said Manoah, "if and when your words come true and the child is born, what rules is he supposed to live by?"

The messenger told Manoah what he had told Hattie already, that it was not about what the child did, it was about what Hattie was to do, or not do, while she was pregnant. She was not to eat grapes, or drink wine or other strong drinks. She was not to eat anything that the priests of Yahweh said were "unclean" and unfit to eat. She was not to cut the boy's hair.

Manoah, as was the custom in those days, invited the stranger to stay as his guest, telling the stranger he would roast a young goat for dinner. The stranger declined his offer but told him that

if he really wanted to roast something he could offer a burnt offering on the altar to Lord Yahweh.

Surprised by the man's strange response to a dinner invitation, Manoah asked him, "Who are you? What is your name?"

The messenger of Lord Yahweh said to him, "You don't want to know who I am. You would be shocked if you knew." Then the stranger left.

Manoah went to his herd, picked out a young goat which he then killed and placed on a large boulder he used as an altar. He added firewood and piled grain around the goat, then lit it all on fire and dedicated it to the *God of Miraculous Events*. As the flames and smoke rose from the fire the messenger of Lord Yahweh suddenly appeared and rode the flames and smoke into the sky. As the messenger ascended upwards into the air Manoah and Hattie fell to the ground in fear as Manoah cried out in anguish, "We will certainly now die, because we have seen Lord Yahweh."

Hattie replied, "I don't think so, Manoah, if Lord Yahweh had wanted to kill us he would not have accepted our burnt offerings of meat and grain, and he would not have announced to us that we were going to have a special child dedicated to him."

Almost a year later Hattie gave birth to a son and named him Samson, who grew to be a strong but troubled and troublesome young man.

The Book of Judges, in which this story is found, does not tell us the name of Manoah's wife, but the Talmud, the Jewish commentary on the Torah, tells us that her name was *Hatzlelponi*, an assertion that is repeated several times. That's good enough for this story.

Forty years is a common period of time mentioned in various biblical stories and it does not necessarily mean precisely 40 years; more likely it means a long period of time with some special significance.

The word *messenger* is sometimes translated as *angel*.

The "burnt offering" in this story involves both animal sacrifice and agricultural produce and combines the once separate ritual offerings to the gods of pastoral and agricultural peoples.

LOVE, LIONS AND BEES

Samson was a big and powerful man and he was not afraid of the Philistines. He went to their various towns regularly. One day Samson was visiting the nearby Philistine town of Timnah where he saw a very beautiful young woman and immediately fell in love with her. He went home and told his parents that he had seen a beautiful woman at Timnah and wanted her as his wife. He asked his parents, Hattie and Manoah, to go to Timnah, find the girl's parents and make whatever financial arrangements were necessary for him to obtain the woman as his bride.

His parents were not happy. His father said to him, "Samson, why do you want to marry a foreigner, particularly one who is our enemy? Surely there are enough women among your own people that you don't need to marry a foreigner?"

Samson told his father, "But I want that woman! She pleases me. I don't really care what you think."

Samson's parents did not know that the Lord Yahweh had made the woman attractive to Samson because Yahweh was looking for an excuse to destroy the Philistines. At that time the Philistines still dominated the Israelites and Yahweh, who was the protector god of the Israelites, was always looking for a reason to provoke a fight between the Israelites and their neighbors, particularly the Philistines.

Samson's parents finally agreed to negotiate for the woman and went with Samson to Timnah. While Hattie and Manoah were negotiating with the woman's parents, Samson wandered around outside the city near the vineyards. A young lion suddenly appeared on the path and roared ferociously as if he was about to attack. The spirit of Lord Yahweh rushed to

Samson and gave him superhuman strength. Samson tore the lion apart barehanded.

After the parents had conducted their business they returned to where Samson was waiting for them outside the city walls. They went home together. Samson did not tell his father or his mother what he had done while he was waiting for them.

Days later Samson went to the woman's house to talk with her. He was very attracted to her and visited her several times over the following days. After the financial arrangements were completed he returned to Timnah to marry the young lady, accompanied by Hattie and Manoah. When he got close to Timnah he asked his parents to wait for him for a few minutes while he wandered off into the fields. Samson wanted to look at the carcass of the lion he had killed and had thrown into the bushes a few days before. He discovered that a swarm of bees had made a hive in the carcass of the lion, and there was lots of honey in the hive. He scraped it out with his hands and ate some as he went back to join his parents. He told his parents he had found some honey and gave some to his parents and they ate it, but he did not tell them that he had taken the honey from the carcass of the lion he had killed.

They continued on together to the woman's house for the marriage and celebration of the marriage feast. Samson provided the feast, as was customary in those days. He invited 30 young men from Timnah to celebrate with him. During the festivities Samson told the guests that he had a riddle for them. If they could explain the riddle within 7 days, he would give each of the 30 guests a new linen suit and a new fancy dress clothes for special occasions. But if the young men could not explain it, they would have to provide Samson with 30 new everyday linen suits and 30 sets of dress clothes. The guests agreed and asked Samson for the riddle.

Samson told them the riddle, "Out of the eater came something to eat. Out of the strong came something sweet."

For three days they could not explain the riddle. On the fourth day, frustrated that they could not figure out the riddle, they said to Samson's wife, "You have got to convince your husband to explain the riddle to you, or we will burn you and your father's house with fire. Did you invite us to this wedding to take advantage of us and make us poor?"

So Samson's wife came to him with tears in her eyes. She said, "You don't love me anymore. You must really hate me. You have asked my people a riddle but you have not explained it to me."

He said to her, "Look, woman, I have not even told my father or my mother. Why should I tell you the answer?"

She cried whenever she was around him for the full seven days that the feast lasted. She kept nagging him, and she eventually wore him down so that on the seventh day he told her the answer to the riddle. She went to her friends and explained the riddle to them. On the seventh day before the sun went down the men went to Samson and said, "What is sweeter than honey? What is stronger than a lion?"

Samson was angry that he had been betrayed by his wife. He said to the men of Timnah, "If you had not plowed with my heifer, you would not have found out my riddle."

Samson was filled with rage and anger. The spirit of Lord Yahweh rushed to him, giving him superhuman strength. He went to the neighboring Philistine city of Ashkelon. Furiously he killed thirty men, took their clothes and whatever else they had on them, and gave the festal garments to those who had explained the riddle. In hot anger he returned his wife to the

best man, essentially divorcing her, and went back to his father's house.

You may have heard the expression, “A man’s word is his bond.” In the ancient Near East, a man’s word must be kept. Samson was obligated to provide the men of Timnah with the clothes he promised them despite the fact that they had cheated to get the answer to the riddle.

THE ENDLESS CYCLE OF REVENGE

After a while Samson got over his anger. He figured that he may have been too hasty to divorce his wife, so he went to see her to determine if they could get back together. Samson brought his wife a young goat as a peace offering. He said to his father-in-law, "I want to get back together. I want to go into my wife's room to sleep with her." Her father would not allow Samson near his wife's bedroom. He said, "Samson, you divorced her. I was sure that you had rejected her so I gave her to your friend. She's taken. You can't have her, but you can have her younger sister, who is prettier, so why not take her instead?"

Samson was burning with anger. He said to his father-in-law, "This time, when I get revenge on the Philistines it will be your fault."

Samson caught three hundred foxes. He made some torches. Then he took pairs of foxes and tied their tails together and then tied a torch between each pair of tails. When he had set fire to the torches, he let the foxes loose into the standing grain of the Philistines and into their vineyards and olive groves. He burned their grain, their olive groves and their vineyards to the ground.

The Philistines were upset and angry. They wanted to know who had done this disastrous act that had ruined all their crops. Eventually they learned that Samson had destroyed their crops as revenge because his father in law had given Samson's wife to his friend. So the Philistines retaliated—they took their revenge by burning alive Samson's former wife and her father.

Samson was now even angrier than before and swore that he would take revenge on the Philistines for killing his former wife and father in law. One act of revenge begets another and so the attacks continue in a vicious cycle. Samson attacked as many

Philistines as he could find and killed as many as he could. Then, his anger satisfied for the moment, he left the area and hid in a rocky cave nearby to await the next act of retaliation.

Conflicts inevitably escalate and get out of hand, and this one was no exception. Samson was an Israelite, a foreigner. The Philistines wanted revenge for Samson's killing of their people and so they assembled their army to attack the city of Lehi in Judah, their closest Israelite neighbor. The men of Judah heard about the preparations for war and were surprised by the impending attack and sent an official to ask the Philistines why their army was assembling to march against an Israelite town, since they were supposed to be allies.

The Philistines sent an answer, "We have no quarrel with you. We want to capture that troublemaker Samson and to do to him what he did to us."

The men of Judah were surprised and annoyed at Samson, so they sent three thousand soldiers to the cave where they heard Samson was hiding. They said to Samson, "Why are you causing trouble with the Philistines? Have you forgotten that the Philistines are our rulers? Don't you realize that they are more powerful than we are? Are you trying to get us all killed?"

Samson responded, "I just did to them what they did to me."

The leader of the men of Judah told Samson, "We don't want trouble with the Philistines. We have come here to arrest you and we are going to turn you over to the Philistines, so that our lives are not in danger. They can do what they want with you." Samson agreed to go with the men of Judah, but only after they swore and oath that they would not harm him or kill him. The men of Judah agreed to tie him up and turn him over to the Philistines, but promised they would not kill him.

As the Israelites returned with Samson as a prisoner, the Philistines, who were waiting outside the town of Levi, saw that Samson was tied up as a prisoner and they came shouting to meet him. As the Philistines got close Samson could feel his strength and power return to him as the spirit of Lord Yahweh rushed on him. The ropes that bound his arms melted away as if they had caught fire and his hands were free. Samson found a fresh jawbone of a donkey lying on the ground so he reached down and grabbed it and with it he killed a thousand Philistine soldiers.

When he had finished killing all the Philistines he could find, he threw away the jawbone but he had become exhausted and thirsty after so much killing and wanted a drink of water. He did not see any water nearby so he called on Lord Yahweh to provide him with water. He said to Lord Yahweh, "I killed all these people like you wanted me to, but you have not provided me with any water to quench my thirst. I won a great battle for you so how about providing me with water? Do you want me to die of thirst right here after such a great victory? Or perhaps fall into the hands of the uncircumcised Philistines?"

Lord Yahweh heard him complaining so he split open a hollow place in a rock and a spring of water came out of it. After he had a drink, Samson felt refreshed again.

Lord Yahweh lives by the same moral code as those who worship him, the law of blood revenge, retaliation against those who cause injury. He sets the moral standard for his followers, "Do unto others whatever they do to you—get even!" The writer Richard Dawkins says, "The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal..., capriciously malevolent bully."

The phrase "uncircumcised Philistines" is intended as a racial slur. Most peoples of the Near East, both in ancient times and today, practice circumcision. The phrase may or may not reflect historical reality, but it clearly reflects a sense of Israelite cultural identity and symbolic-ritualistic separation from their neighbors. If the Philistines were originally an Aegean people the phrase may be literally true, as the ancestors of the Greeks did not practice circumcision.

BETRAYED BY LOVE

Samson was recognized as a leader among the Israelites because of his strength, but he preferred the more urbane and sophisticated Philistine cities to the rural villages of the Israelites. Samson had quite a reputation as a womanizer and he knew his way around the various cities. One day Samson went to Gaza, where he saw a prostitute that appealed to him so he went with her back to her house to spend the night.

The city leaders of Gaza heard that Samson was in town visiting the local house of ill repute and were determined to use the occasion to capture him, so they devised a plan. A group of men hid just outside the city gate and kept quiet through the night, planning to kill Samson when he left the city in the morning when the gates of the city were opened.

Samson did not stay with the prostitute all night. At midnight he left the prostitute and headed for the city gates, which were closed as was customary procedure for cities at night. With his great strength Samson took hold of the huge doors to the city and tore them loose, pulling the door posts out of the ground while they were still attached to the gates, and carried them away on his shoulders all the way to a hill near Hebron, where he left them on the hillside. The men of Gaza were too surprised and afraid of Samson to try to stop him.

Samson continued to annoy and provoke the Philistines. On one of his trips among the Philistines he ran across a woman named Delilah and fell in love with her. He began to spend time with her and the leaders among the Philistines hatched another plan to capture Samson.

They went to Delilah and asked her to try to find out what made Samson so strong so they could figure out how to finally capture

him. They offered her 1100 silver coins if she could find out the secret of Samson's strength. Delilah accepted the offer and agreed to try to find out what made Samson so strong.

When Samson next visited Delilah's bed, she sweet-talked him for awhile, then got around to asking the critical question in her soft, sultry voice. Samson didn't want to tell her the truth, so he told Delilah that if he was tied up with new bowstrings that had not dried out, his strength would be gone. She told the Philistine leaders. They provided her with new bowstrings. On his next visit, when Samson was drunk and had fallen asleep, she tied him up with the new bowstrings and then signaled the Philistines, who ran into the room to capture Samson, but got quite a surprise when Samson snapped the bowstrings he was tied with and chased the Philistines out of the room. Delilah pouted and said to Samson, "You are making fun of me and you have told me lies. Please tell me the truth. What is your secret?"

Samson was physically strong but mentally weak, and apparently he was a slow learner where deceptive women were concerned. This time he told Delilah that his strength would be gone if he were tied up with new ropes that had not been used. Again Delilah told the city leaders, who provided her with new ropes. Again Delilah got Samson drunk and when he was asleep tied him up with the ropes. Again the men of the city rushed into the room to try to capture him, and again Samson broke the ropes and chased his attackers out of the room. Again Delilah cried her eyes out with fake tears, complaining that Samson was making a fool of her by continuing to tell her lies (conveniently ignoring the fact that she was making a fool of him).

So they played their deceptive parts once again. Samson told Delilah another lie, "If you weave the seven locks of my head

together on a loom and fasten it tight with a pin, then I will become weak and be like anyone else."

Samson left and went home. The next night he returned. Delilah gave him wine until he was drunk and fell into bed. While he slept, Delilah took the seven locks of his head, wove them into a web on a loom, and fastened them tightly with a hair pin. Then she said to him, "Get up! The Philistines are here, Samson!" But he awoke from his sleep, and pulled away the pin, the loom, and the web. The Philistines once again ran from Samson.

Delilah cried and with tears running down her face once again she said to him, "Samson, how can you say you love me when you continually lie to me? You have deceived me three times now and have not told me what makes you so strong." She continued to nag Samson, day after day, until finally he was tired of her pestering and foolishly oblivious to the danger he was in, he broke down and told her the secret of his strength.

Samson admitted to Delilah that he was a Nazirite, dedicated to Lord Yahweh from birth, and as a symbol of his dedication to Lord Yaweh his hair had never been cut nor his face shaved. He told her that if he were shaved his strength would leave him and he would be as weak as anyone else.

Delilah realized that this time he had told her the secret of his strength. She sent a message to the leaders of the Philistines, saying, "This time come up, for he has told his whole secret to me." The leaders of the Philistines immediately met with Delilah and brought her the money they had promised her. She let Samson fall asleep on her lap, and when he was asleep she called in a barber and had him shave off the seven heavy golden locks of hair from Samson's head. Immediately he became weak as his strength left him.

As she had done before she cried out, "The Philistines are here for you, Samson!" When he awoke from his sleep, he thought, "I will go after them just as I have done before and will shake myself free." He discovered that his strength had left him. Lord Yahweh had taken away his strength. So he was captured by the Philistines, taken as a prisoner and his eyes were gouged out. They took him to Gaza, bound him with bronze chains and set him at hard labor grinding grain at the mill in the prison.

Samson's hair began to grow back over time.

The Philistines gathered in their temple periodically for one of their many festivals, and so on the next festival day, when they had gathered together to perform ritual sacrifices to their god Dagon, the crowd clamored for Samson to be brought before them. The leaders of the Philistines brought Samson out of prison and put him on exhibit, standing between the great pillars of the temple. The citizens were happy. They shouted in joy that their god was powerful and had overcome Samson's strength and delivered Samson to them as a prisoner. The temple was filled with about three thousand shouting and joyful people. They taunted Samson, encouraged by their leaders, who were enjoying the spectacle after their long years of humiliation by Samson. They screamed, "Samson, you killed many of our fellow citizens, but our god Dagon has defeated your god Lord Yahweh, and you are now our prisoner and your strength is gone." The crowd was ecstatic. They tormented Samson and made fun of him.

Samson remembered that the pillars where he was standing held up the temple roof. He said to the guard who had led him to the temple and was still holding his hand, "Lead me to the pillars. I want to put my hands on them and lean against them for support." So the guard placed his hands on the pillars.

Then Samson called out to the Lord Yahweh, "Remember me. Give me my strength back just this one more time, Lord Yahweh, so that I can take revenge on the Philistines for my two eyes."

As he cried out to the Lord Yahweh Samson grasped the two middle pillars on which the roof of the temple rested, and he leaned his weight against them, his right hand on the one and his left hand on the other. Then he shouted, "Let me die with the Philistines." He strained with all his might. The pillars buckled, the roof fell and the temple walls collapsed on the Philistine leaders and all the people who were in Dagon's temple.

At his death he killed more than he had killed during his life. He became a hero to the Israelites. His brothers and all his family recovered his body from underneath the collapsed temple, took him home, and buried him in the tomb of his father Manoah.

The Samson stories constitute a continuous tale in the Book of Judges, which purportedly describes events in a period in the early history of the Israelites in the Land of Canaan in which there was no common government or tribal unity, a time in which (as the author of *Judges* puts it) everyone did what he thought was right. It was a period of disunity and virtual anarchy in which the various Israelite tribes fought with their more urbane neighbors. They had not yet found sufficient common ground to unite as tribes with a common heritage. Local heroic figures (known as “judges”) emerged periodically to lead the Israelites in their struggles with their enemies.

Samson may be a historical character who is given heroic status, but is more likely a mythical character who shares a number of similarities with other mythical-heroic figures, particularly *Herakles* (in Greek mythology) and *Enkidu* (in Mesopotamian mythology). We observe that both Samson and Herakles fought a lion with their bare hands, smashed their enemies heads with a blunt weapon they found near to hand (Herakles, a club; Samson, the jawbone of an ass), and met their fate at the hands of a woman.

DAVID FIGHTS A GIANT

Many different tribal groups lived in the land of Canaan and they were in perpetual conflict with each other. They fought over land for agriculture or grazing their herds, or water rights, or sometimes just because they were combative and wanted whatever their neighbors had. The Philistines lived in cities along the coast and the Israelites lived in small tribal villages with their flocks and herds. The Israelites and the Philistines were constantly at war with each other.

The Israelite tribes eventually got together and chose Saul as their king. That was seen as a threat by the Philistines, who gathered their soldiers to fight a war against the Israelites. The two sides assembled their armies at each side of a valley, cautiously waiting for the other side to make the first move.

As the two armies watched each other nervously, a giant of a man stepped forward from the Philistine army and issued a challenge to the Israelites to fight a duel with him. Instead of the two armies engaging in combat and killing off many on each side, he offered to fight any Israelite soldier in a single combat to the death. Whoever won for his side would be the victor and the other side would agree to surrender.

The giant's name was Goliath and he was almost ten feet tall. He wore a heavy bronze helmet and a suit of bronze armor weighing 125 pounds. He carried a javelin of bronze over his shoulder and a spear with a head weighing 18 pounds. He stood in front of the Philistine troops, the sun shining off his armor, and shouted to the Israelites: "Why should our armies fight? If you have a brave man among your troops send him out to fight me. If he is able to kill me, then we will surrender to you. But if I win, then you will have to surrender to us and you

will become our servants. I dare you to fight me. Is there a man in Israel brave enough to accept my challenge?"

King Saul and his soldiers were very afraid of Goliath. It didn't look like single combat with Goliath would be much of a fight. So they kept silent.

Among the Israelite soldiers were three sons of Jesse, an elderly villager from Bethlehem who was the grandson of Ruth. Jesse's youngest son David was still a teenager and he was at home in Bethlehem, tending his father's sheep.

The standoff with the Philistines had gone on for forty days. Each morning the giant stood in front of the Philistine army and shouted challenges and insults against the Israelites and every evening he repeated the challenges.

Jesse was worried when his sons did not come home from the battle, so he told young David to take bread and cheese to his brothers and gifts of food to the commander of their unit. He asked David to find out what was going on and how his brothers were doing. The next morning David rose early, and taking the food and gifts with him, set out to find the army. When he got to the Israelite military camp he left the food and gifts with the baggage master and headed out to the battlefield. He found his brothers and greeted them.

As young David talked with his brothers Goliath came out of the ranks of the Philistines and issued the same challenge as previously. The Israelites were very much afraid and someone commented that if anyone was able to defeat Goliath the king would surely make him rich and give him his daughter to be his wife.

So David said, "Who among the Israelites is going to fight that guy who is insulting us and our god? Surely someone is brave

enough to fight him and revenge those insults to us and our Lord Yahweh.”

David’s oldest brother heard David’s comment and he got very angry and said to David, “Why have you come here? You left our sheep behind and abandoned your duty and now you dare to come down here to challenge our bravery?”

David said to his brother, "What have I done to make you angry? I was only asking a question.”

King Saul heard that the boy was questioning why no Israelite was brave enough to fight Goliath so he demanded that David be brought to him. David then told King Saul that if no soldier would fight Goliath he would do so.

Saul said to the arrogant youth, "Young man you can’t be serious. You can’t fight this Philistine. You are just a boy, and he is a giant who has been a warrior from his youth."

But David was not afraid. He said to Saul, "I am a shepherd who tends the sheep for my father; and whenever a lion or a bear grabbed a lamb from the flock, I went after it and struck it down, rescuing the lamb from its mouth. If the bear or lion turned to attack me, I would catch it by the jaw, strike it down, and kill it. I have killed both lions and bears and just as I did with the lions and bears, I will kill this uncircumcised Philistine, since he has insulted the armies of the Lord Yahweh."

King Saul said to David, "OK, kid, go and fight Goliath, but I warned you that you will get yourself killed. May our Lord Yahweh go with you.” King Saul provided David with armor, a bronze helmet and a battle sword, but David discovered he could not walk with the armor on, it was too heavy for him. David said to Saul, "Sir, I cannot wear this armor; I am not used to it." So David took off the armor, picked up his walking staff,

chose five smooth stones from the dry creek bed and put them in his shepherd's bag, and with his sling in his hand he headed slowly toward Goliath.

The Israelite army watched incredulously as David headed toward the Philistine lines. Goliath saw him coming, walking toward him confidently, his staff in his hand. Goliath walked out to meet him, intending to fight him in the flat land between the armies. Then he stopped, puzzled, and angrily shouted to David, "Why are you coming after me with a stick? Do you think I am a dog?" Goliath began to swear. He was very angry and considered it an insult that a young boy was sent by the Israelites to fight him. He shouted to David, "Stop, young man, return to your people or I will tear you apart and throw the pieces of your flesh to the birds of the air and the wild animals of the field."

David kept walking steadily and said calmly, "You come with a sword and a spear and a javelin. I come to you in the name of Lord Yahweh and the army of Israel, which you have insulted. The Lord Yahweh will help me kill you. I will cut off your head and I will give your body to the birds of the air and the wild animals of the earth, and when I have done that, everyone will know that the Lord Yahweh, the god of Israel, is more powerful than your gods, for he has defeated you."

Then David ran toward Goliath, reached into his bag, took out a stone, put it in his slingshot, and fired it quickly at Goliath, hitting him in the center of his forehead. Goliath fell unconscious. David grabbed the Philistine's sword and cut off his head.

Seeing that Goliath was dead the Philistines ran away with the Israelite soldiers in hot pursuit. The Israelite army chased the Philistines into the wilderness and toward their cities, killing

many of them as they ran. Eventually tiring from the chase, the Israelites returned to the camp of the Philistines and plundered it. David took Goliath's head with him, but left Goliath's armor behind.

King Saul was surprised at the sudden turn of events in his favor and asked his army commander Abner who the boy was who had fought and killed Goliath. Abner replied, "I have no idea who he is." King Saul told Abner to find out. So Abner found David, still holding Goliath's head, and took him to the king.

"Who are you? Who is your father?" asked King Saul. David answered simply, "I am David, a shepherd, the youngest son of your servant Jesse from Bethlehem."

Giants appear throughout the early Hebrew literature and they are generally associated with Gath, one of the Philistine cities. According to Hebrew mythology the sons of Lord Yahweh were attracted to human women and mated with them, producing a race of giants. They usually represent the forces of evil that have to be defeated with the help of the Israelite god, Lord Yahweh.

David's reference to Goliath as an "uncircumcised Philistine" was an insult, the equivalent of calling him a barbarian or savage. Desert tribes like the Israelites routinely practiced circumcision and those who were not circumcised were considered unworthy outsiders.

In this story King Saul did not know who David was. In the previous story (which we did not include in this volume), David was Saul's constant companion at court, a musician who had been brought from Bethlehem to play soothing music to soften the king's frequent foul moods and temper tantrums. The apparent contradiction merely confirms that many of the stories in the Hebrew Bible were assembled from independent stories that had circulated among the tribes. When they were assembled by a collator into a collection of stories, there was little concern about the obvious inconsistencies between them.

DAVID AND JONATHAN – A LOVE STORY

King Saul had four sons and two daughters. His eldest son, Jonathan, was a military officer under General Abner, commander of the Israelite army. Jonathan was standing with his father when Abner brought young David to the King, still holding the severed head of Goliath. Prince Jonathan saw the strong, handsome young teenager standing courageously before his father, the king, and immediately fell in love with him. The king was captivated by David's charm and couldn't help but notice Jonathan's interest in David, so he asked David to remain as his guest in the palace.

Jonathan and David became close friends and constant companions. Because they loved each other they entered into a committed relationship in which they pledged their devotion, their lives, their loyalty and their inheritance to each other and to their descendants forever. Jonathan stripped off his clothes and gave David his robe, his sword, his bow, and even his belt.

Despite his youth and because he was a hero to the people David was put in charge of a military unit. The Israelites continued to fight against the Philistines and the Israelites were just as often the aggressor as they were the victim. David won many battles. Because he was so successful in battle King Saul made David his army commander, replacing Joab. That was a popular move because David was seen as a hero who had saved the Israelites from the Philistines, but soon it created friction between Saul and David. Whenever the army returned victorious after battling the Philistines the people chanted a slogan during their victory dance—"Saul has killed his thousands, and David his ten thousands." That was more than annoying to Saul, it was embarrassing and humiliating to the king and it made him increasingly angry every time he heard it.

Saul was more than angry, he was jealous and fearful that David's increasing popularity would undermine his authority as king. He began to look at David with suspicion. One day Saul's anger boiled out of control. David had been playing music after dinner in the palace, as he did sometimes, and in a sudden fit of rage Saul threw his spear at David and tried to pin him to the wall. The spear missed. David escaped from the palace and stayed away until King Saul calmed down.

Saul's increasing hatred of David led him to contrive plots to get rid of him, but because David was popular Saul was afraid to take direct action against him. Cunningly, Saul devised a plan for David to be killed in battle. There were many battles to be fought and many opportunities would arise. Saul assigned a battalion of soldiers to David and gave him a series of dangerous missions, hoping each time that David would be killed or injured, but to King Saul's amazement and annoyance David continued to win battles and he continued to come home as a conquering hero. The more the people loved David, the more King Saul hated him.

Concealing his hatred and pretending that David was his ally, he sent for David and said to him, "I have a proposal for you. Here is my eldest daughter Merab. I will give her to you as your wife—on one condition. You must accept the command of my armies and fight valiantly against my many enemies."

David was surprised at the offer of marriage and not much interested. He said to King Saul, "My Lord, you are a king, I am a common man, a lowly shepherd from a humble family. How can I be son-in-law to the king?" David did not accept the offer and eventually Merab was married off to another man.

King Saul heard that his other daughter Michal was in love with David. "Great," thought Saul, "here is another chance to create

mischief.” He sent a messenger to meet with David privately to tell him, “The King is very pleased with you. The people love you. The King wants you to be his son-in-law and he will give you his youngest daughter Michal as your bride.” So the messengers went to see David, and delivered the King’s message to him.

David sent his reply to the King, “You don’t think it is a big deal to be son-in-law to the King? How can I marry Michal? I am a poor man from an unknown family. I am not from the upper classes. I do not have the status or the resources to marry a king’s daughter.”

The messengers carried David’s response to King Saul. He sent them back to David to tell him, “The King does not expect any payment or marriage gift. He asks as payment for his daughter Michal only one thing—that you bring him one hundred foreskins from the bodies of Philistines so he could have some pleasure from seeing the death and humiliation of his enemies.”

David liked the proposal and accepted the King’s offer. So early the next morning David gathered up his troops and went hunting Philistines. Before long he had captured and killed 100 Philistines, cut off their foreskins and delivered them to King Saul. True to his word, but disappointed that David was not killed in battle, Saul gave Michal to David.

Despite his public show of friendship to David, it had become obvious to King Saul that Lord Yahweh was protecting David and that made King Saul frightened of him and increased his hatred and strengthened his desire to kill him. The Philistines and the Israelites continued to battle each other and kill each other regularly, and David continued to win battles and he got more and more famous as a conquering hero throughout Israel and in neighboring lands.

Saul met with his advisors, including his son Prince Jonathan, and discussed with them his wish to kill David because he threatened the royal authority. Jonathan immediately went to David and said, "My father is plotting to kill you, probably tomorrow morning, so be careful. Go to our secret place and wait there for me. I will take my father out to the field near our secret meeting place and I will talk to him and bring the conversation around to discussing you and I will see what I can find out. If I learn anything I will let you know."

The next morning, as they had planned, Jonathan took Saul out to the field for a conversation and casually mentioned his friend David and the success that David had in fighting against the Philistines. He said to his father, "You should not harm David. He is my friend. He has done nothing against you. His successes in battle have strengthened you against your enemies. He has risked his life for you and for the Israelites. He is innocent of any wrong doing. He is not plotting against you. Why do you want to kill my friend David?"

Saul listened patiently to Jonathan, and then said, "OK, you have made your point. I promise you, before our Lord Yahweh, that I will not have David killed."

Jonathan went to David and told him about the conversation with his father and that King Saul had sworn an oath not to harm him, so David returned back to the palace with Jonathan. Everything seemed normal and happy once again.

It is hard to deny the obvious homo-erotic aspect of this story, although many commentators walk around the issue pretending not to see what is obvious by discussing the symbolism of god's love for mankind and the beauty of a selfless friendship between two virile men.

The "covenant" between David and Jonathan, in which they promise their everlasting love and care for each other, looks an awful lot like what we would call a "committed relationship" and may be the earliest record of gay marriage. Some commentators have suggested that Jonathan's disrobing in front of David and handing David his weapons can be understood symbolically as Jonathan's acknowledgement of David's superiority as a hero and eventual king of Israel, and we concede there may be some merit to that argument so long as we don't lose sight of—or deny—the intense relationship between the two men.

A curious aspect of this story is that Abner, the commanding general of the Israelite army, seems to be ignored once David appears, but after the fallout between Saul and David he suddenly appears again as commanding general. Where he was and what he was doing in the interval is unclear but we can probably assume that this inconsistency in the story did not matter to the story tellers.

Cutting off the foreskin of an enemy's penis was an intentional humiliation of the corpse and had a religious function as well. Lord Yahweh required his followers to be circumcised. By removing the foreskin of their dead enemies they demonstrated they were conquerors and in death the enemy surrendered his foreskin as a sacrificial offering to Lord Yahweh, their bodies acknowledging in death the lordship of Lord Yahweh.

YOU CAN'T GO HOME AGAIN

It did not take King Saul very long to forget his promise to Jonathan and his oath before the Lord Yahweh. He was still angry because David was successful in battle and popular with the people, and in his dark moments he began to think of new ways to kill David.

One evening Saul sent agents to David's house to watch his movements and to make sure David was home because he planned to go to David's house the next morning to kill him. However news and intrigue travels fast around a palace and friends of Michal went to her house to tell her about the plot. Michal warned David that he had to get away immediately. Since agents were already outside his house, David escaped by climbing down a rope through a rear window, climbing over a wall and heading out into the darkness.

To cover for David, Michal took a household god from its place by the front door and laid it on the bed, put a net of goats' hair on its head, and covered it with bedding. When Saul sent his men into the house to seize David, Michal said to her father, "He is sick in bed." Saul sent the men into his room to find him, telling them, "I don't care if he is sick. Bring him to me bed and all so that I can kill him."

The king's agents saw what appeared to be a person lying in the bed, but when they pulled the blanket off they found the statue of the household god and reported to the king that David was not there. Saul angrily said to Michal, "Why have you deceived me like this and let my enemy escape?"

Michal told her father that there wasn't much she could do to stop him and anyway David had threatened her so she did not interfere when he left.

David ran from the King's men and left the area. He went to see the prophet Samuel, who was at the holy sanctuary at Ramah and told him the story of recent events and Saul's attack on him. Samuel took David to the nearby village of Naioth to hide him from Saul and remained there with him, but the rumors of his location quickly got back to Saul.

Saul sent agents to Naioth to capture David, but when the agents got there they found the prophet Samuel and his fellow prophets in a religious frenzy, some in a trance-like state, others dancing and shouting and acting as if they were drunk. The Lord Yahweh caused the agents of Saul to fall into the same religious fervor, dancing and carrying on like the prophets. When they did not return, Saul sent more agents to see what happened, and they too were caught up in the religious fervor. Finally Saul himself went to find out what happened, and when he got to Ramah he stopped at the local well to inquire where Samuel and David were. He got directions to Naioth and headed off, but as soon as he got there a spirit sent by Lord Yahweh entered his body and caused him to fall into a prophetic frenzy, just like those he had sent before him. He stripped off his clothes and danced naked until he collapsed. He lay there appearing to be drunk all that day and into the night.

While Saul and his men were in their religious frenzy and unaware of what was going on around them, David quickly returned to the palace to see Jonathan and asked him, "What's going on? What have I done? Why is your father trying to kill me?"

Jonathan was surprised. He did not know anything was wrong. He said to him, "David, you're wrong. He's not trying to kill you. My father doesn't do anything, no matter how unimportant it is without telling me, so why wouldn't my father tell me if he was trying to kill you. No, you're wrong, that's not true."

David replied, “Jonathan, you must believe me. Think about it. Your father knows very well that you love me. He’s not going to tell you. He said to himself, ‘I can’t let Jonathan know what I am about to do or he will be angry.’ But truly, as the Lord Yahweh lives and as you yourself live, there is but a step between me and death. Seriously Jonathan, he is trying to kill me and I just barely escaped from him and came here immediately to see you.”

“What do you want me to do?” asked Jonathan. “You know I will do whatever you want me to do to help you.”

“OK, Jonathan,” David replied, “I have an idea. Tomorrow is the festival of the new moon and I am expected to be here and eat with the king. I will not be here. I will actually be hiding in the field nearby. He will probably notice that I am not at the festival and he will ask you where I am. If he asks you, tell him that I asked you if it was ok if I skipped the festival here because I got an invitation from my brother—not so much an invitation as a command—to go to Bethlehem to celebrate the festival with my family and you had agreed to let me go.”

“If he says, ‘OK, that’s fine,’ then I will know that it is safe, and I will come back. But if he is angry that I am not there, that indicates he is still trying to kill me. You will have to let me know. So, my dear Jonathan, it’s now up to you. We have made a commitment to each other to love and protect each other and I would never betray you or your family and I know you would never betray me, so if I am guilty of some crime, kill me yourself right now, but don’t take me back to your father to kill me.”

Jonathan was troubled that David doubted him, and said, “David, I would never betray you. If I knew my father intended to harm you I would tell you.”

“How will you get word to me if it is safe for me to come back to the palace?” asked David.

Jonathan said, “Come with me to the field.”

They went to the field together.

Jonathan said, “Wait here for me. I’ll find out my father’s intention and whether it is safe for you here. One way or the other I will let you know. If it is safe for you, and if I live to get back here, we will get together and we can show our love for each other. If not.... well, if I am killed by trying to find out my father’s plans, then promise me that your love will remain with my family forever.”

“I promise,” said David.

Then Jonathan asked David to swear before Lord Yahweh that he loved him, and Jonathan swore that he loved David as much as he loved his own life. They swore their love to each other.

Then Jonathan said, "Tomorrow at the festival of the new moon you will be missed because your place at the dining table will be empty. I will see how the King reacts. On the day after tomorrow, go to the place where you hid yourself earlier, just over there and remain hidden beside that large boulder. I will shoot three arrows in the general direction of the boulder, as though I was shooting at a target. Then I will send the servant boy I bought with me, saying, ‘Go, find the arrows.’ When he is looking for the arrows, if I say to the boy, ‘Come closer, the arrows are over here, come and pick them up,’ then you will know that there is no danger and it is safe to come home”

“But if I say to the boy, ‘Go farther away. You’re too close,’ then you will know that there is danger and you need to get away.”

The next day at the festival dinner the king sat upon his seat, as he usually did next to the wall. Jonathan stood, while General Abner sat by Saul's side. David's place was empty. Saul did not say anything that day, for he thought, "Something has happened to him; maybe he is not ritually pure because of something he has done."

On the second day of the festival David's place was still empty. So Saul said to his son Jonathan, "Where is your friend, David? He wasn't here yesterday and he is not here today!"

Jonathan answered Saul, "David asked me for permission to go to Bethlehem to celebrate the feast with his family, and I told him it was ok."

Saul got violently angry and screamed at Jonathan, "You sonofabitch. You have shamed yourself with your relationship with David, and you have shamed your mother and me. Now hear this—so long as David lives, you shall not inherit my throne. This kingdom will never be yours. Now get out of here, and get David and bring him to me so that I can kill him."

Then Jonathan answered his father Saul, "Why should he be killed? What has he done to deserve death?"

Saul responded by throwing his spear at him so Jonathan knew that his father was serious about killing David. Jonathan got up from the table in fierce anger and defiance at his father. He ate nothing more that day. He was sad for David, and sad for their relationship, and he was sad because his father had disgraced him in public.

In the morning Jonathan went out into the field to keep his appointment with David, and he took a little boy with him. He shot the arrows and then said to the boy, "Run and find the arrows that I shot." As the boy ran, he shot an arrow well

beyond him. When the boy came to the place where Jonathan's arrow had fallen, Jonathan called after the boy and said, "The arrow is farther away beyond you. Hurry, and find it."

So Jonathan's boy gathered up the arrows and returned to his master. The Jonathan gave his weapons to the boy and told him to go home. As soon as the boy had gone, David rose from beside the boulder, and he and Jonathan hugged and kissed each other, and cried in each other's arms, sad that they had to separate for their safety.

Then Jonathan said to David, "Go in peace, since both of us have sworn in the name of the Lord Yahweh, that the relation between me and you will endure as long as we live and it will continue between my descendants and your descendants, forever."

David got up and walked away slowly. Jonathan stood there quietly for a minute, then turned and went back to the city.

"Household gods" were typically terra cotta figurines, fairly common in Canaanite homes, considered by some scholars to be ancestors who were worshipped as gods. The figures stood near the door and were considered to have an almost magical quality about them. They were important symbolically because they were the "protector" of the household against foreign spirits or demons.

Saul suggested that David might not have come to the religious festival because he was not "ritually pure." There are several reasons why he might not be pure, which could include coming into contact with a dead body or with sexual fluids, which required a ceremonial washing to remove the impurity before participating in a religious ceremony.

DAVID AND THE LITTLE LAMB

In the spring of the year, at the time when kings lead their army into battle against their neighbors and enemies, King David ordered his military commander Joab, his officers and a large part of his army to attack the Ammonites, a nation that occupied land far to the east across the Jordan River in what is now the Kingdom of Jordan. David did not go to war with his army. He remained comfortably at home in his palace in Jerusalem with his many wives.

One afternoon the King got up from his afternoon nap and went to the roof of the palace to take a walk to clear his head. He had a good view from his roof into the courtyards of the surrounding houses and that afternoon he saw something he was not expecting but which excited him greatly. He could see in a courtyard below the palace a beautiful woman sunbathing nude in the warm afternoon sun. The courtyard could not be seen from the street because it was surrounded by a wall, but from the height of his roof the King could look down into the courtyard.

King David had many wives, formerly the wives of King Saul, which David had taken as his own after Saul's death as a very public symbol that he had replaced the King. Despite the many wives already in his house he was attracted to this beautiful naked woman and wanted her, so he sent a member of his staff to find out who she was. The report came back to the King that the woman's name was Bathsheba and she was the wife of Uriah, a captain in David's army who was away at war with the Israelite army fighting the Ammonites.

In those days the King had the power to summon anyone he wanted to do anything he wanted, and since he also had the power of life and death, the people did what they were told to

do. So King David sent a messenger to summon Bathsheba, and when she arrived he took her to his bed and had sex with her. Then he sent her home.

Bathsheba discovered soon afterwards that she was pregnant and went to David to tell him that she was carrying his baby. She reminded him that if Uriah came home after the war and found her pregnant, he would know the child was not his and there would be trouble. David told Bathsheba, "Don't worry. I'll take care of it. He won't find out."

David thought he could hide the affair if Uriah came home to his wife and had sex with her. Uriah would not know he was not the baby's father. So David sent a messenger to Joab and ordered him to send Uriah back to Jerusalem.

Uriah returned to Jerusalem and reported to the King. "Tell me," said David to Uriah, "how's the war coming along? How are you doing?" And so the two men made small talk about the battle. Then David told Uriah to go home, rest and relax, get cleaned up and spend some time with his wife for a few days. David was expecting Uriah to go home.

But Uriah did not go home. He went to the quarters of the palace guard and slept there. When David heard that Uriah had not gone home but was hanging out with the elite guards, David sent for him again, and said to him, "Uriah, you have been away from home for a while and you just came back from a long trip. Why don't you go home to your own house instead of hanging out with the guards?"

Uriah was an officer with integrity who took his duty seriously, so he said to the King, "Sir, you know that I cannot go home when the army is camped in tents in the open field fighting with the enemy. Military officers don't do that, and I won't go home until everyone else gets to go home also."

His plan was not working. So David said to Uriah, “OK, I understand, remain here a few days at the palace, and then you can go back to the war.” The King invited him to dinner and gave him lots of wine, hoping to get him drunk and then send him to his house. Uriah got drunk, but after he left the dinner he staggered back to the guard’s quarters and lay on his bed. Still he would not go home to his wife.

The next morning David wrote a letter to General Joab, sealed it, and gave it to Uriah to take to Joab. The letter said: “Put Uriah in command where there is the most serious fighting going on, and in the middle of the battle, withdraw all the support troops so he is left there to be killed by the enemy.”

As a good soldier Joab did not question his orders and did as he was told. The capital city of the Ammonites, Rabbath-Ammon, was a fortified city and the battle for the city had been going on many months. During the siege of the city Joab observed one area where the fighting was very fierce and the enemy soldiers were very skilled and brave. He sent Uriah to lead a group of soldiers in an attack against those enemy soldiers and Uriah fought valiantly and got up close to the walls of the city when suddenly the enemy archers fired down on them from above. Uriah and a number of Israelite soldiers were killed.

When the battle was over Joab sent a messenger back to King David to tell him the latest news from the battle. He couldn’t just say that Uriah was dead as the king ordered, so he gave the messenger very specific instructions about exactly what to say. “After you tell the king about the latest battle and that we lost a lot of men in the attack, he is likely to get angry and ask you, ‘why did you go so close to the city walls? Didn’t you realize that they would shoot arrows down at you? Don’t you remember the stories of people being killed close to the wall when the citizens threw down rocks or anything they had onto the heads

of the soldiers below?’ Then tell him that Uriah, who was leading the troops, was killed in that battle.”

The messenger then traveled back to Jerusalem and met with the king to give him the latest word about the battles. He told David, “During the battle the enemy counter-attacked from the city and charged us, but we fought them and we drove them back to the city gates but then the archers shot down on us from the walls and we lost a lot of men and your friend Uriah was killed.”

David told the messenger to return to Joab and deliver a message: “General, that is just the misfortune of war. Some men are killed, others survive. Battles are lost and other battles are won. Don’t get concerned about your losses. Just carry on and capture the city.”

When Bathsheba heard that her husband had been killed in battle, she mourned for him. After the period of mourning was over King David sent for her and made her one of his wives. Soon she gave birth to a baby boy.

Lord Yahweh had heard about David’s behavior. He was not happy with David for committing adultery with Bathsheba and having Uriah killed to cover it up, so he sent his prophet Nathan to the King, who told David a story:

“There were two men in a certain city, one was rich and the other one was poor. The rich man had many flocks and herds, but the poor man had nothing but one little baby lamb which he had bought and raised. The lamb lived with his family, played with his children, shared the little food that they had, drank and ate on the family’s dishes, and slept with them at night.

One day a traveler came to the home of the rich man and custom obligated him to prepare a meal for the traveler. He didn't want to use one of his own sheep so he stole the lamb from the poor man, sacrificed it and served it to his guest."

David became very upset at the unfairness of the situation. He said angrily, "How could anyone do that? A rich man who would steal a poor man's only lamb does not deserve to live. He should be required to payback four times the value of the lamb he stole. He deserves no pity because he had no pity on the poor man who had little."

"Ah, David," said Nathan. "You don't get it. You are the man! The Lord Yahweh sent me here to tell you that you are guilty—you are the rich man who took from the poor man. Said Lord Yahweh, 'I made you king over all Israel. I rescued you when your life was in danger from King Saul. I gave you Saul's palace and his wives to be yours. If that was not enough I would have given you more. You are ungrateful. Why have you done such a despicable act? You took Uriah's wife. You had him killed by the sword of the Ammonites. So hear this! The sword will follow you wherever you go. Members of your own family will die by the sword. You did your evil in secret, but the evil that happens to you will be before your eyes in the light of the sun. I will take your wives from you and they will sleep with your neighbors in public and in front of you. The whole nation will see your shame.'"

David was shocked. He said to Nathan, "I have done wrong before our Lord Yahweh."

Nathan replied, "Yes, you have, but you will not die—the child that was born to you and Bathsheba will die." Then he turned away from David and went back home.

Suddenly the Lord Yahweh struck Bathsheba's child and it became very ill. David pleaded with Lord Yahweh for the child's life. He did not eat. He lay all night on the ground beside the baby. His family and friends stood by him, urging him to rise from the ground and eat but he ignored them and he would not eat. Seven days later the child died.

David's servants were afraid to tell him that the child was dead. They were afraid he would harm himself. When David saw that his servants were whispering to each other he suspected the worst and asked them, "Is he dead?" They confirmed that the baby was dead.

David got up, bathed, put on perfumed oil, and changed into clean clothes. He went to the house of the Lord Yahweh and performed a ritual. Then he went home to the royal palace and asked his servants to bring him food and he ate.

His servants said to him, "Sir, we don't understand. You cried for the child while he was alive, but now that the child is dead, you got up and ate food as if you didn't care. Why?"

"Simple," said the King, "while he was still alive I did all those things because, who knows, maybe it would help. Maybe the Lord Yahweh would change his mind and let the child live. But the child is dead. Will crying bring him back? There is nothing I can do, so I have to get on with life."

After he had eaten David went to Bathsheba's bedroom to comfort her in her sorrow for her dead child. While he was in her bedroom he had sex with her. Bathsheba got pregnant again, and in the course of time she had a son and named him Solomon.

Meanwhile, the war with Ammon continued. The city of Rabbath-Ammon was under siege. No one could enter or leave

the city and no supplies could get in and eventually the city weakened and Joab's army got inside the walls of the lower city along the river.

Joab sent a message to King David, who still had not come to the battlefield to lead the army, which said simply, "I have gotten inside the walls of Ammon and conquered the city. All that is left is the citadel, where the king is holed up with what remains of his army. Either come now and lead our army in the final battle, or I will conquer the city and its king myself, and the city will be named after me."

King David decided it was time for him to go to the battlefield. He took the remaining soldiers from Jerusalem with him to Rabbath-Ammon, led them in a final attack on the citadel and conquered it. David seized the gold and jewel-encrusted crown of the King of the Ammonites and put it on his head as his new crown. He grabbed everything of value in the city as the spoils of war and took it back to Jerusalem with him. He took the people captive and made them slaves. He set some to work in the fields with picks or in the woods with iron saws and axes. Others he set to work making bricks for construction in Jerusalem.

We do not know why David did not lead the army into battle. For a king to stay home while troops were in the field was highly unusual. There is speculation that David might have been ill or suffering from depression.

Rabbath-Ammon, capital city of the Ammonites, is today the city of Amman, capital of Jordan.

This story mentions iron tools. Up to now only copper or bronze implements and tools appear in the stories.

A CASE FOR THE SPECIAL VICTIM'S UNIT

Tamar was a beautiful young lady who lived in Jerusalem close to King David's palace with her brother Absalom and her mother, who was one of the many wives of King David.

Amnon also lived close to the palace and he had his eyes on Tamar. He could not keep his eyes off her. He couldn't keep his mind off her either. He was captivated by her beauty and had convinced himself that he was in love with her. He was desperate to get her into her bed and have sex with her. He was so obsessed with Tamar that he made himself ill with frustration at not being able to have his urges satisfied. Like a love sick adolescent he was often gloomy and dejected.

His friends could not help but notice his deep depression. One day Amnon's friend Jonadab said to him, "Amnon, what's troubling you? You don't look well. You look so tired when you get up in the morning, as if you hadn't slept all night. Tell me what's going on."

Amnon confessed that he was in love and wanted sex with Tamar but she had not yet shown much interest in young men and particularly she was not much interested in him—and anyway there were a couple of problems. She was still a virgin and she was his half-sister.

"No problem," said his friend Jonadab who had a reputation for being crafty, "here's what you can do. Pretend to be sick. You've been acting like you were sick for the past week anyway, so get into bed and send a servant to your father to tell him that you are very sick, and given the way you have been acting lately he will believe you. Tell the you want Tamar to take care of you and to make a special meal for you from a recipe you have, and that having Tamar comfort you will make you very happy."

So Amon took Jonadab's advice. Amnon went to bed and pretended to be ill. He sent a messenger to his father and when the king came to see him, Amnon said to his father, "Please, Father, it would make me very happy if you would send my sister Tamar to come and visit me and bake a couple of special cakes for me in my sight, and feed them to me."

King David thought that was a reasonable request, so he went to Tamar and told her to go to Amnon's house and prepare some food for her sick brother.

Tamar went to Amnon's house, where she found him lying in his bed. He told her what he wanted. She proceeded to prepare the dough, knead it, make the special cakes, bake them and finally brought them to Amnon. He refused to eat them, saying he did not feel like eating at the moment. Then he sent everyone out of the house.

When everyone had gone Amnon said to Tamar, "Bring the food you made into my bedroom, so that I can lie down and you can feed me." So Tamar took the cakes she had made, and brought them into the bedroom to Amnon. As soon as Tamar came close to him he grabbed her hand and said to her, "Come, Tamar, lie down beside me on the bed. I want to hold you close and make love to you."

She pulled away from him and said, "No, Amnon. We can't do that. We are brother and sister. Get that thought out of your mind because we can't have sex together. It violates our relationship as brother and sister. It violates our culture. It would be shameful. I would be ruined. I could not marry. I would be disgraced. You would become a villain and an outcast. Don't even think about it. Go to our father, the king, and ask him to let you marry me. That's the only option you have."

Amnon did not listen to Tamar's pleading. He grabbed her and raped her by force.

When he was through raping her he became disgusted with himself and with Tamar. He screamed at her, "Get out! I don't want you around me!"

Tamar was crying. She said to him, "No, I won't go. Sending me away after you raped me is an even worse crime than the rape."

Amnon screamed for his servant and said to him, "Get that woman out of here. Send her away. Push her outside and lock the door behind her."

Tamar had been wearing the long robe with sleeves that was typical for unmarried women at that time. After she was thrown out of Amnon's house she tore her clothes and put ashes on her head to symbolize her embarrassment and humiliation, and she wandered away crying.

Absalom saw her as she approached their house and said to her, "What happened, Tamar?"

She admitted to Absalom that Amnon had raped her. Absalom was concerned about the family's reputation and told her, "Tamar, you have to keep this quiet, after all he is your brother. We cannot let people find out about this. It is too embarrassing for the family." Tamar said nothing. What could she say when her own brother wanted her to keep quiet about a molestation committed by a member of the family. So she went to her room, hurt and alone. She remained there, living as if she were a widow whose husband had died. She did not come out of her room.

The news of her rape eventually got to King David. Gossip runs quickly around the palace and soon everyone knew. David was

very angry. But Amnon was his oldest son and he loved Amnon and he would not punish him.

Absalom kept silent about what had happened, but he hated Amnon for raping his sister. He would not speak to Amnon. But he did not forget what Amnon had done.

Two years later Absalom developed a plan to get even with Amnon. Shearing wool from the sheep was an annual event and a time when people gathered to help each other. It was a family occasion. So when the season for sheep shearing arrived Absalom hired sheepshearers from a neighboring town and invited his brothers to bring their sheep to get them sheared at his farm in the country. The brothers did not respond to his invitation so Absalom went to his father and asked that it be an official family gathering and a major feast. He wanted the King to ask everyone to come. A royal invitation meant that attending the event was really a command. David agreed and sent word to his sons to join Amnon for a sheap shearing festival, although the King was not interested enough to come.

Absalom prepared a major feast—good wine, plenty of food, music and dancers. Everyone came and was having a good time, and getting a bit drunk. Absalom told his servants, "Keep your eye on Amnon. When he has had a lot to drink and he is beginning to feel the effects of the alcohol and is looking sleepy, let me know, and when I give you the signal, kill him. Don't be afraid. I am the King's son, and I have given the order, so be courageous and brave and strike to kill."

The servants of Absalom did as they were told, and when the signal was given they struck and killed Amnon. Then the rest of the King's sons ran, mounted their mules and fled back to their homes.

While they were still on their way home, a messenger arrived at the palace with a message to King David that Absalom had killed all his sons and none had survived. King David got up and tore his garments, and lay on the ground crying. His servants then tore their garments in sympathy with their King.

Jonadab, the crafty friend of Amnon who had told Amnon how to get Tamar to his house to have sex with her said to the King, "You should not presume that they have all been killed. You will find that only Amnon is dead. His death was inevitable from the day he raped his sister Tamar. Your other sons have survived."

Shortly thereafter there was a shout from the watchman in the tower. He could see a crowd in the distance coming toward the palace. Just as Jonadab had said, the rest of the King's sons arrived back in Jerusalem to the palace. It was a mixed reaction from the King, glad that not all of his sons were dead, but upset that his eldest son Amnon, who was his favorite, had been confirmed dead.

Absalom fled from the anger of the King. He went to a neighboring city that was not under the control of the King and stayed there for three years.

Amnon and Tamar were children of King David by different wives. Incest with one's sister was just as unacceptable then as now. There was an exception—a royal marriage. Tamar reminds Absalom that sex between them would only be possible if Absalom got David's permission for them to be married. Brother-sister marriages were tolerated for dynastic marriages to ensure the integrity of the line.

THE WISE WOMAN FROM TEKOA

David eventually got over the loss of Amnon, but he missed his son Absalom and wanted very much for him to come home. That was a problem for the King, because Israel operated by the law of blood revenge—if a person was murdered, their next of kin had to kill the murderer in order to restore the balance of justice, and of course David was Absalom's father, and his brothers lived around the palace, and they all had a duty to kill Absalom.

Joab, who was commander of Israel's army and a close friend of the king, realized that David missed his son Absalom and was longing for his return even though Absalom had murdered the heir to the throne. Under the circumstances Absalom could not easily be forgiven, so he developed a plan to convince David to look at the situation differently and let Absalom return home.

Joab sent for a woman from the village of Tekoa who had a reputation as a wise woman and a good story teller and together they created a ruse to get David to change his mind. Joab told the woman from Tekoa to pretend to be a mourner. He said to her, "Put on black mourning clothes, don't put on any perfumed oil, look like you have been crying for a long time and are very sad from dealing with some unknown but tragic event." Then he told her to go to King David and tell the King she had a problem and needed the King's help. He gave her a story to tell the King.

So the woman did as Joab told her. She went to King David and bowed down low to the ground in front of the King, and said to the King, "Please help me."

"What's the problem?" said King David.

She answered, "My dear King, I am a widow. My husband is dead. I had two sons and they fought with one another in the

field. There was no one to break up their fight and one struck the other and killed him. Now the whole family is against me because I love my son and I do not want the family to take revenge against him, according to the law. They insist that I must surrender the man who killed his brother, so that they may kill him in exchange for the life of his brother whom he murdered, even if it means that we destroy the remaining heir to our family. They would quench my one remaining flame and leave to my dead husband neither his name nor any descendants.”

King David said to the woman, "Go home, and don't worry any more. I will take care of this for you. I will give orders protecting you from your family."

The woman of Tekoa said to the king, "If there is any guilt for failing to see that the law of blood revenge is fulfilled, let that guilt fall on me. It is not your fault, it is mine. You are innocent of any wrong doing for ending this blood revenge.”

King David said to her, "Lady, if any of your relatives or neighbors says anything unpleasant to you about this matter or threatens to take any action against you, let me know and he will never bother you again."

The wise woman of Tekoa said to King David, “If it please the King, *make your promise before the Lord Yahweh* that the person who seeks blood revenge will kill no longer so that my son will not be harmed.”

The King replied, “I swear before Lord Yahweh that your son will be safe.”

Then the woman turned to the King and said, "Now that you have made that commitment before the Lord Yahweh that the law of blood revenge will not apply to my situation, there is

something I need to say to you—please give me permission to speak to you boldly and directly.”

“OK,” said the king, “You have my permission to speak.”

The woman said, “Sir, you yourself are not acting according to your own words. You just swore before Lord Yahweh that the law of blood revenge should not apply here, but you stand convicted by your own words when you do not allow your own son to come home because of the law of revenge. You will not protect your own son from his brothers, who will kill him in revenge for his brother’s death. The fact is, sir, we must all die, you, me, your son Absalom. Our lives are like water poured onto the ground. But you are wrong if you think that Lord Yahweh insists on blood revenge.”

“There is something else I need to tell you. At first I was afraid to come to you with my request. My friends and neighbors advised me not to come. But I decided to bring my request to you anyway because I thought there was a chance you would listen to me and grant my request. You listened to me and you granted my request. Your words have comforted me and I am not worried any longer. My Lord, you are like the messenger of our Lord Yahweh, wise enough to decide issues of good and evil.”

King David stopped her. “Now I have a question for you, and I need a clear answer from you.”

“Yes,” my Lord, “what is your question?”

“Who put you up to this?” asked the King. “Was it Joab that sent you here?”

“Yes, Sir,” she admitted, “Joab did send me. He wanted to change your attitude toward your son Absalom.”

King David called for Joab, and when he arrived at the palace, David said to him, "You have made your point, Joab. Blood revenge shall not apply. Go get Absalom and bring him home—but there is a condition, he will be under house arrest and must go to his own house and remain there. I don't want to see him. I don't want him in the palace."

So Absalom returned and was confined to his house and could not leave. After two years Absalom was tired of being confined to his house, so he sent word for Joab. He wanted Joab to take a message to the king. Joab did not come. Absalom sent another message to Joab, and still Joab ignored him.

Joab's house and fields were next to Absalom's house. Absalom said to his servants, "Go to Joab's grain field and set it on fire. That should get his attention." So Absalom's servants set the field on fire. Joab was furious when he heard that Absalom's servants had set his field on fire and destroyed his barley. He went to see Absalom and demanded, "Why did your servants set my field on fire?"

Absalom said, "Look, Joab, I sent word to you because I want you to go to King David and ask him why he bothered to have me come home if he is going to keep me a prisoner in my house. Tell the king to kill me if this is about guilt, otherwise to let me be free as anyone else.

So Joab went to the king and told him what Absalom had said. The king sent Joab back to Absalom with an invitation to meet with the king. Absalom was happy that King David had responded to his request to meet. He went to the palace and got onto his face before his father and asked forgiveness, but his father took him gently by the shoulder, picked him up and hugged him. King David released Absalom from house arrest and Absalom returned to his home.

Curiously the *Law of Blood Revenge*, which was common throughout the region in early times, is under attack in this story, which suggests that this story comes from a later time when attitudes and practices toward blood revenge were changing.

THE GRAND CONSPIRACY

Absalom did not stay out of trouble very long. He was the son of the king, he was handsome and he was very well liked by the people. He was so handsome that he was considered the most attractive man in Israel. He had long flowing hair which was thick and bushy. Most of all he was a wealthy prince and had lots of land and herds, he was a natural leader, and he began to think that he should be king instead of his father David.

He bought a chariot and horses. He hired 50 armed body guards to accompany him wherever he went as a sign of his power and authority. He began to act like a prince.

It was customary for the king to sit each morning at the gate of the city, together with the leaders of the city and his key advisors, so that people from around the kingdom could come to him with their problems and get a judicial decision to resolve arguments with their neighbors. The king would listen to their grievances and problems and give his decision. It was the Supreme Court at work. King David sometimes sent a deputy to hear cases but later in his reign he seems to have lost interest in the business of being king and ignored his duty to sit at the gate of the city.

Absalom decided to turn the King's negligence of his ceremonial and practical duties to his advantage, so each morning he got up early and together with his band of armed men he positioned himself along the highway leading to Jerusalem so that travelers coming to the city would have to pass him on their way to the city gate. When anyone came to the city looking to have their case heard before the King, Absalom would stop them and ask them where they were from, and talk with them about their case. He would tell them, "Your case is a good one. Too bad I

am not the judge! Then I would hear your case and give you the justice you deserve.”

Absalom made a lot of friends this way. People liked him and they became disappointed with King David. Through the years Absalom had done a lot of politicking and had built up a following.

After four years of building favor with the people and sensing that he was now strong enough to move against the King, Absalom said to David, “Please let me go to the shrine at Hebron and pay the vow that I made to the Lord Yahweh. When I was living in exile, before you let me come home, I had told Lord Yahweh that if he brought me safely back to Jerusalem that I would perform sacrifices to him at his sacred shrine at Hebron.”

The king said to him, "Go in peace. Do your duty to Lord Yahweh."

Absalom went to Hebron, but at the same time he sent secret agents to the different tribes of Israel to initiate the rebellion and to tell the people, "As soon as you hear the sound of the trumpet from an approaching messenger, shout: ‘Absalom is our new king; he became king at Hebron.’"

Two hundred men from Jerusalem went with Absalom to Hebron as his invited guests, presumably to help him celebrate a religious festival. They did not know anything about his plot to overthrow his father the King. While Absalom was offering the sacrifices at Hebron, he sent for Ahithophel, David's political and military advisor, whom he had recruited as an ally against his father. The conspiracy grew in strength and the number of people involved with Absalom and his plot increased steadily. Word about Absalom's real motives for going to Hebron began to spread and the Israelites in Jerusalem who were supporting

King David soon realized that the plot was serious and the King was in danger.

A messenger arrived at the palace with bad news, which he reported to David. The summary of the message was, "Absalom is very popular and many people all across the Israelite tribes are with him. He is assembling an army to come after you and seize the kingdom for himself. They will attack soon."

David hurriedly summoned his advisors and told them, "We have to get out of here! Absalom is on his way here with an army. If we don't leave now there will be no escape. Hurry, or he will soon overtake us and it will be too late to escape. He intends to put all of us to death with his sword."

The king's officials said to the king, "Your servants are ready to do whatever our lord the king decides." So the king and his entourage left, followed by all his household staff and many of the people of Jerusalem. David left his ten minor wives behind to take care of his house. The people of Jerusalem wept aloud in sadness and in fear as David's staff, his advisors, his family, and his military units passed them by on their way to the wilderness where they hoped they would be safe from Absalom's army.

The priests left the city also carrying with them the Sacred Ark. They had wanted to remain with the King on his journey into the wilderness to escape his son's rebellion, but David stopped them and told them it would be better for them to remain in Jerusalem. That way they could spy on Absalom and the rebels and could report their activities. The chief priest's son was to carry messages back and forth to David's camp just across the river at the ford.

David stopped the procession just outside the city and slowly climbed the Mount of Olives, crying with his head covered and walking barefoot, and some of the people who were with him

covered their heads and climbed up the hill with him. While he was on the hill David learned from a messenger that his chief advisor Ahithophel had deserted him and was among the rebels that Absalom was leading toward Jerusalem. When he heard that news David said, "O Lord Yahweh, I pray you, turn the advice of Ahithophel into foolishness. Do not let his advice help Absalom overthrow me."

When he got to the top of the hill where the altar of Lord Yahweh was placed, his long time friend Hushai came to meet him with his coat torn and earth on his head as a sign of mourning.

David greeted him but said to him, "If you go on with me into the wilderness, you will be one more burden to me. But there is a way you can help me. If you go back to Jerusalem and tell Absalom, 'I will be your loyal servant, O King, just as I have been your father's servant in the past, so now I will be your servant,'—he will welcome your help and then you will be able to argue against the advice Ahithophel and advise Absalom to take action that will cause him to be defeated. The sons of the high priests Zadok and Abiathar have remained in the city. Whatever you hear about Absalom's plans go to the priests and tell them what you learn. Their sons will bring the news to me at my camp. So Hushai, David's friend, arrived back at Jerusalem just as Absalom was entering the city with his army.

While traveling along the road with all the people who were accompanying him King David was approached by a very angry man, who was swearing at the King and throwing rocks at the travelers. David recognized him as a relative of his predecessor King Saul. The man kept screaming at the King. "Good riddance, you murderer. You will get what you deserve now. The Kingdom is now in the hands of your son. You are a man of blood who lived by the sword, and now you will die by the

sword. The Lord Yahweh is now bringing revenge on you for what you did to King Saul.”

Abishai, one of his commanders, said to the King, “Are you going to let that dog get away with cursing you? Let me go after him and cut off his head.”

“No,” said David, “Leave him alone. If he is cursing me because the Lord Yahweh told him to, then there is not much point in trying to stop him. If he is acting on his own it does not matter. Even my own son is trying to kill me so why should we be upset if a relative of King Saul curses me to my face? I expect that the Lord Yahweh is going to see what is happening to me, and maybe he even caused it, but in the end I expect that Lord Yahweh is going to see me stuck in the wilderness hiding from Absalom and feel sorry for me and eventually he will reverse my situation and restore me back to my rightful place as King.”

David and his men continued along the road, while the angry man walked along on the hillside opposite them and continued to curse David as he went, throwing stones and flinging dirt at him.

After a few days of traveling the king and all the people who were with him arrived wearily at the bank of the Jordan River, where they set up their camp and rested.

It was customary for tribal kings and the senior leaders of the desert tribes to meet together in public and to be available to settle quarrels, a tradition that continued when the tribes settled into villages and cities. The king and his council customarily sat at the city gate to carry on business and socialize, a predecessor of the coffee klatch.

Absalom chose Hebron as the place from which to initiate his revolt against his father because of its symbolic value. It was the second most holy place after Jerusalem and was the place where King David began his rule as King.

WITH FRIENDS LIKE THESE....

Absalom and all rebels who were supporting him arrived at Jerusalem to find the city had been abandoned except for the priests and a few elderly people who had been left behind.

When David's friend Hushai approached Absalom, he said, "Long live the king! Long live the king!"

Absalom was surprised to see him and said to Hushai, "Is this how you show your loyalty to your friend, the King? You deserted him? Why did you not go into exile with your friend the King?"

Hushai replied to Absalom, "No, I did not go with him. Since the Lord Yahweh has chosen you to be the Lord over his people and the Israelites have chosen you to be their king, I would rather be with you than with your father. Moreover, I have always served the King. Who else should I serve other than the son of the King who has now become King? Just as I have served your father, so I will serve you."

Then Absalom said to his counselor Ahithophel, "Give us your advice; what shall we do now that we have taken control of the city?"

Ahithophel said to Absalom, "The first thing you have to do is to show that you have really taken over from your father by taking his wives as your own. Make a big display of having sex with them. That is the most important thing you could do to symbolize that you have replaced your father in his own house. He will no longer want those ladies as his wives and you will permanently damage your relationship with your father. That will strengthen you in the eyes of your followers."

To make sure everyone knew what was going on, Absalom ordered his followers to build a marriage tent on the roof of the palace where everyone could see what was going on, and one by one he took his father's wives into the marriage tent.

Then Ahithophel said to Absalom, "The next thing you must do is to go after David and kill him. Let me choose twelve thousand men and I will set out tonight to pursue David. I will come upon him while he is weary and discouraged and throw him into a panic. The people who are with him will flee. They will abandon him. I will then strike down only the king, and I will bring all the people back to you as a bride comes home to her husband. You seek the life of only one man, so only one person has to die. The people will be happy that they have been spared. They will return to Jerusalem, and life will go on with you as king."

That advice pleased Absalom and the elders of Israel. But, to make sure he was getting the best possible advice, he called David's friend and advisor, Hushai, and asked him what he thought should be done next. When Hushai came to see Absalom, Absalom said to him, "Ahithophel said we should immediately pursue and kill King David; what do you think?"

Then Hushai said to Absalom, "I can't believe that Ahitophel told you to go after him immediately and pursue him into the wilderness. That was terrible advice. You know that your father and his men are warriors and that they are enraged at having been caught off guard by your rebellion. They are like a bear robbed of her cubs. You know that your father is expert in war. You will not catch him off guard. He will not spend the night with the troops. You will not find him by a sneak attack. He will be waiting for you.

"As soon as David's troops get an initial victory over that small force you would send against his army there will be fear among

your troops and the rumor will quickly spread that you have been defeated. David's reputation as a warrior will melt the hearts of any soldiers who oppose him. My advice is that you wait until you gather a large army from all the tribes and that you lead the troops in battle personally. We will overwhelm him with a superior force and neither he nor his followers will survive. If David escapes the battle and withdraws into a city we will bring ropes and we will tear down that city and drag it into the valley until there is nothing remaining for rubble."

Absalom and his men liked that advice better and set about making plans to assemble an army.

Then, seeing that his advice was being followed, Hushai went to the priests and told them about the plan and had them send a message to King David to tell him that a large army would be coming against him soon and advised him to move his camp to the other side of the Jordan River, crossing at a nearby ford.

The priests' sons were aware that they were being watched so they had left the city and gone to a nearby village. The priests sent a servant girl to find their sons to give them the message for King David, but a boy saw the priests' servant girl leave town and reported it to Absalom who sent agents to find the young men. They hid in a well in the courtyard of a home. The homeowner covered the well with a cloth and spread grain on the cloth as if to dry it. The agents did not suspect anything and were told by the homeowner that the young men had already left.

When Ahithophel saw that his counsel was not followed and that he no longer had the respect of the new king and had humiliated himself by deserting King David, he saddled his donkey and went home to his own city. He set his affairs in order and hanged himself.

King David had lots of friends from neighboring countries. Hearing that he was in trouble and realizing the troops would be hungry and thirsty without the resources to sustain themselves in the wilderness, they sent supplies—beds, basins and earthen vessels, wheat, barley, meal, parched grain, beans and lentils, honey and curds, sheep, and cheese from the herd, everything an army would need—and they sent soldiers to reinforce David's army.

David prepared for war. He assembled the men who were with him, and as any good general would do, he divided them in units of a hundred and larger units of a thousand. Then he divided the army into three groups: one third under the command of Joab, one third under the command of Abishai, and one third under the command of Ittai.

King David announced to his commanders, "I will personally lead you in battle." But his military advisors told him, "No, not this time. If we are defeated and we have to retreat they will not follow us. It is not us they are after, it is you. You are the king and you are worth thousands of us. So if we are defeated, get help from our allies and come to our rescue."

The King agreed. "I will do whatever you think is best," he said.

King David stood by while all the army marched out by hundreds and by thousands. The king gave his final orders to his commanders, telling them to deal gently with his son. Everyone heard that command.

David's army met Absalom's troops in the forest of Ephraim. Absalom's army was crushed there by David, and twenty thousand men died in that battle. Absalom ran into one of David's units and tried to get away. He was riding on his mule, and the mule went under the thick branches of a great oak. His massive head of hair caught fast in the oak and he was left

hanging there suspended between heaven and earth, while the mule that was under him went on.

A soldier saw it happen and told Joab, "I saw Absalom hanging in an oak." Joab said to the man who told him, "Where did you see him? Why didn't you kill him? I would have been glad to give you ten pieces of silver and a belt."

The soldier said to Joab, "Even if I felt in my hand the weight of a thousand pieces of silver, I would not raise my hand against the king's son; we all heard the king command you and your fellow officers to protect his son Absalom from harm! If I had killed him and the king found out about it (and there is nothing hidden from the king), then you would have denied that you knew anything about it and I would be in big trouble."

Joab said, "I am not going to waste time arguing with you." He took three spears and headed off to find Absalom. He found him hanging from the oak tree still alive, and hurled his three spears into him. Then Joab's armor-bearers finished him off and made sure he was dead.

Joab sounded the victory trumpet and the troops came back from pursuing the fleeing army of Absalom. At Joab's orders the soldiers took Absalom's body, threw it into a large pit they had dug in the forest, and piled huge stones over his grave. Absalom's soldiers were allowed to return to their homes.

Joab was reluctant to send a messenger to David with the news of the battle. He wanted to claim victory over Absalom, but he did not want to report that Absalom was dead. However he finally agreed to send a runner with the report of the battle.

David was sitting in his customary place at the gate when a sentinel on the roof shouted that a lone man was running toward the city. The messenger arrived, prostrated himself

before the king, and announced, "I bring good news to the King. Your army has won the battle. Your enemies are defeated."

"What about Absalom? Is he ok?" asked David.

"May all your enemies be as dead as Absalom," answered the messenger.

David was stunned to hear that Absalom was dead. He left his place near the gate and went into a private room over the city entrance, where the guards stayed. He cried in anguish and grief. "Oh my son Absalom, if only I had died instead of you."

A short while later Joab and the army returned back to Jerusalem. The King was not there to greet them on their arrival. Joab asked where David was, and the people told him that David was in the guard room crying for his dead son.

Joab was furious with the King. What should have been a celebration of a great victory was being turned into a day of mourning for the rebel. He stormed into the room where King David was grieving, and said to him, "Get hold of yourself. Do your job as King. Your army has just won a spectacular victory and should be getting praise at a celebration. Here you are, feeling sorry for yourself and your rebellious and troublesome son. You are treating this as a funeral rather than a victory. Our soldiers risked their lives for you. Many of them died in battle. You've got your priorities screwed up. You are causing them to feel ashamed rather than happy. Your actions are telling your commanders and your officers that they mean little to you and that if they had died in battle and Absalom were alive you would be happy.

"Get your emotions under control," Joab continued. "Go out and speak to the soldiers who so bravely fought for you. Congratulate them on their victory. I swear, David, if you do not

go out and speak to the troops and take your place as King at the entrance, by tonight not one of them will stay loyal to you, and the tragedy that happens to you will be worse than any other disaster that has happened to you up to now.”

Then King David realized that Joab was right. He got up, straightened his robes, went outside and took his seat by the entrance to the city. The troops settled down when they were told that the king was in his place by the Gate.

The wives that King David left behind in Jerusalem were his less important wives, called *concubines* in the Bible. They had less status than primary wives because they were not from important families and their dowries were smaller. Apparently David took his primary wives with him on his escape from Jerusalem.

PALACE POLITICS, PLOTS AND CONSPIRACIES

King David was getting old and like many older people with poor circulation he got cold easily. His servants brought him blankets and robes and kept a fire going in his room, but David felt cold most of the time and his servants worried about him. “You know,” said one of his servants to his companions, “I bet a really hot woman would keep him warm.” Agreeing that it was worth a try, his servants said to the King, “How about we get a hot young virgin for you? She can wait on you and comfort you, and she can sleep with you at night. That ought to warm you up.”

The King agreed, so the servants began a search throughout Israel to find just the right girl for him. Eventually they found Abishag, a young and beautiful virgin. They explained to her that her job was to provide for the King’s needs, to be his servant, and to sleep with him at night to keep him warm. After some instruction they brought her to the King. She waited on him, made his bed, cooked his food and took care of him during the day. She slept in his bed at night to keep him warm, but she did not have sex with the King.

King David had been neglecting his kingly duties and looked weak physically and politically. Adonijah, David’s son who was next in age to Absalom and handsome as well, had become tired of waiting for David to die because he was eager to become King. Sensing that the time was right to take over from his father, he made plans for an armed rebellion, and just as Absalom did before him, he had chariots made and hired 50 armed men to accompany him as military escorts wherever he went as a display of his power and authority.

His father never kept him under control so Adonijah did as he pleased and David did not pay much attention to what his son was doing. Adonijah discussed his plans discreetly with Joab,

commander of the army, and with the high priests Abiathar and Zadok, and with a number of the key advisors of the King and some of them went along with Adonijah's plan, but the prophet Nathan, and the high priest Zadok, and the military officers of the palace guard did not go along with the rebellion.

Now that he had some of the key leaders on board, the next step in Adonijah's rebellion was to get the support of the Lord Yahweh and the people, and the traditional way to do that was to offer major gifts to the Lord Yahweh at an important sacred shrine. Adonijah sacrificed dozens of sheep, oxen and cattle at the sacred shrine at En-rogel and invited the royal family and key officials of Israel to join him there in a huge feast. He did not invite the prophet Nathan or his brother Solomon to the festival, but of course the word got around that Adonijah was throwing a huge feast at a shrine out of town and Nathan knew about Adonijah's plan to overthrow his father and replace him as king, and quickly surmised that the rebellion was under way..

Nathan wanted to stop Adonijah's rebellion, so he went to Bathsheba, King David's favorite wife and Solomon's mother and asked her, "Have you heard that Adonijah has proclaimed himself king and our lord David does not know it? Did you know that your life is now in danger, as is the life of your son Solomon? You have to take action immediately. Here's what you have to do. Go to your husband the king and tell him that Adonijah has proclaimed himself king, and remind him of his sworn promise to you that Solomon would succeed you on the throne, and ask him why he is tolerating Adonijah usurping his authority."

"While you are talking to him," said Nathan, "I will come into the room and confirm everything you have said. That will force him to act."

Bathsheba was very unhappy to hear that Adonijah was trying to seize the throne at the expense of her son so she went to David's bedroom where she found Abishag taking care of him. She bowed to the King, and he asked, "What do you want, Bathsheba?"

"My lord, when Solomon my son was born you swore before your god the Lord Yahweh that my son Solomon would succeed you as king and would sit on your throne. But now suddenly Adonijah has proclaimed himself king without your knowledge, and he is celebrating and sacrificing at a festival near here with some of your advisors and military officers—a festival to which he did not invite the prophet Nathan, or you, or Solomon. Now everyone is watching you to see what you will do, whether you will let Adonijah get away with seizing the throne or whether you will deal with him. The country waits to hear you tell them who will sit on the throne after you die. Otherwise, when you go to sleep with your ancestors my son Solomon and I will be a problem for Adonijah and he will have us killed."

While Bathsheba was still speaking with the king, the prophet Nathan arrived. A servant announced him. When he came before the king, he bowed low to the ground and said, "My lord the king, did you announce, 'Adonijah shall succeed me as king, and he shall sit on my throne at my death'? Because if you did, I did not know about it. I was surprised earlier today to learn that Adonijah was at the sacred shrine where he proclaimed himself king in your place and sacrificed many oxen, cattle, and sheep, and now he is hosting a huge feast for all your sons except Solomon. Joab and the priest Abiathar, and everyone else is there and they are now eating and drinking with him at his coronation feast, and saying, 'Long live King Adonijah!' But he did not invite me, or your son Solomon. So, my lord King, did you know about this and just didn't bother to tell us?"

King David was surprised. He quickly replied, "Find Bathsheba and bring her to me."

Bathsheba was located and stood before the king. He told her what had happened then said to her, "Bathsheba, despite what Adonijah has done he will not be king. You have my word on that. I swear to you before our Lord Yahweh, and I repeat here what I swore to you previously, your son Solomon shall succeed me as king and he shall sit on my throne in my place. I will make this happen today."

Bathsheba bowed to the King and said, "Thank you. May my lord King David live forever!"

King David then turned to one of his servants and said, "Go get the high priest Zadok, the prophet Nathan, and my military commander Benaiah."

When they arrived at the palace King David told them to take armed palace guards and have them escort Solomon to the holy site of Gihon. Solomon was to ride on the King's mule. When they arrived at Gihon, Zadok and Nathan were to anoint Solomon as King of Israel in a short coronation ceremony. After the coronation they were to sound the trumpet and shout "Long live King Solomon." Then Solomon was to lead the procession back to the palace, where he was to sit on King David's throne. "He shall be king in my place, effectively immediately," said King David.

"As you wish," said Johoida, "It shall be done. Just as the Lord Yahweh has been with my Lord the King, so may he now guide and protect Solomon and make him an even greater king than you."

Then Nathan, Zadok and Johoida, together with an armed escort and the foreign mercenary armies who served King David,

accompanied Solomon, riding on the King's mule, to the sacred place of Gihon. The high priest Zadok took a horn of holy oil from the sacred tent that housed the Lord Yahweh and anointed Solomon with the oil. Then the trumpet sounded and all the people shouted, "Long Live King Solomon." A huge crowd assembled and all the people followed Solomon in a grand procession back to the palace. They shouted with joy, and played on pipes and sounded trumpets, making quite a commotion as they traveled the short distance back to the palace.

Adonijah and all the guests who were with him heard the commotion just as they finished feasting. When General Joab heard the shouting and the sound of the trumpet, he asked, "What's going on in Jerusalem? Why is the city in an uproar?"

While he was still speaking, Jonathan son of the priest Abiathar rushed into the festival. Adonijah said to Jonathan, "Come on in, for you are a friend. You look upset. Surely you bring good news."

"No," Jonathan answered Adonijah, "It is not good news. Our lord King David has made Solomon king. He was crowned at the shrine of Gihon. The whole city is celebrating. His troops are supporting him. The people are supporting him. That's the noise you heard. I'm afraid your rebellion has failed."

Hearing that the rebellion was lost, Adonijah stood in shock as his guests suddenly feared for their lives and quickly left the festivities and went their own ways. Adonijah now feared for his own life in the face of Solomon's anger and revenge. He headed directly for the sanctuary of the Lord Yahweh, where he clung to the horns of the altar. The message got back to Solomon that Adonijah had escaped and was clinging to the horns of the altar,

and said he would remain there until Solomon promised not to kill him.

Solomon said, “If he professes his loyalty to me as King and if he keeps his word, and if he takes no hostile action against me or my authority, I will not harm him. Tell him that.”

Adonijah, hearing that the King had promised him safety, came down from the altar, went to the king, bowed before him and professed his loyalty. Then King Solomon told him, “Get up. Go home. Stay out of trouble.”

The “horns of the altar” may refer to gold-covered replicas of bulls’ horns or upraised stone pillars that were placed at the corners of the altar. Lord Yahweh’s consort (wife) Asherah was often portrayed as a cow. The horns represented the power of the god. Holding onto the horns was presumed to be a claim for the protection of the god.

LET THE RAIN COME DOWN

Shortly after King Solomon's death the political infighting among tribal leaders of the Israelites over the succession to the throne resulted in a split, with some tribes selecting one man to be king and the remaining tribes choosing another man to be king, and so the kingdom was split into northern and southern kingdoms. One group of tribes became the southern Kingdom of Judah with Jerusalem as its capital, and the remaining tribes formed the northern Kingdom of Israel and constructed a new capital at Samaria.

Ahab succeeded his father Omri as King of Israel. Like his father Ahab had a reputation as a man who got more pleasure out of doing evil than he did from doing good. He was noted for his many bad decisions and evil ways and his worst decision, in the eyes of the Lord Yahweh at least, was his marriage to Jezebel, daughter of the King of Sidon, whom he married to build good relations with a neighboring state and gain a political ally.

The god of the Sidonians was Baal, and Jezebel was a serious follower of Baal who brought her religion to the Israelites with a sense of mission and enthusiasm. She encouraged her new husband to build a temple to Baal in Samaria, and Ahab not only built the temple, he also installed a new altar in the temple for sacrifices to Baal. Outside the temple he installed a sacred pole.

Jezebel not only promoted the worship of Baal, she ordered that priests of Lord Yahweh were to be rounded up and executed, which annoyed Lord Yahweh of course, and he became very angry with Queen Jezebel for killing his priests. The Lord Yahweh had made it clear that he did not mind if the Israelites offered sacrifices to Baal, but he insisted on getting top billing—he would not tolerate any god considered more important than him. He had warned them more than once that

they must have no other gods before him or there would be serious consequences. Ahab provoked the Lord Yahweh by supporting the worship of Baal, and the longer it continued, the angrier the Lord Yahweh became. He decided to do something about it.

The Lord Yahweh sent Elijah to deliver the message. One day the prophet Elijah showed up at the Palace and said to King Ahab, "I have a message for you from the Lord Yahweh. He told me to tell you that he is really angry with you, and there will be serious consequences. There will be no rain until I say so, not so much moisture as dew on the grass. Everything is going to dry up. There is going to be a serious drought around here."

Then Elijah walked out and left the King standing there. Elijah had gotten a short way down the road when the Lord Yahweh appeared and told him that he was in danger. He was to travel east, cross the Jordan River, and find a good place to hide near the Wadi Cherith. The Lord Yahweh said to him, "You will find food and water there to help you survive the drought. Drink from the spring and I will send ravens with food for you."

Elijah did as he was told. He crossed the Jordan River and went to the Wadi Cherit. The ravens brought him bread and meat each morning and they returned again in the evening, bringing him more bread and meat.

There was no rain anywhere around. The wadi began to dry up in the drought. The Lord Yahweh had not thought about that problem.

Living conditions in the Wadi went from bad to worse. Lord Yahweh finally noticed Elijah's desperate situation and sent word to him to go to Sidon. When he got there, so the message said, he would find a widow whom the Lord Yahweh had ordered to take him into her house and feed him.

Elijah left the Wadi, as he was told, and went to Sidon. When he got to the gate of Sidon he saw a widow gathering sticks for a fire. Elijah called her to come to him. When she got close to him Elijah asked her to bring him a cup of water. Just as the widow turned to find water for Elijah, he called to her again, and told her when she returned with the water to also bring him some bread.

“That I can’t do,” she said. “I only have a handful of flour left, and a little bit of oil in a jug, and when that is gone I will have nothing. When you called me I was collecting a bit of wood for a small fire. My son and I were going to cook and eat that small bit of flour for our last meal, and after that meal is gone there is nothing else left and we will starve to death.

Elijah said to her, “Madam, do not be fearful of going hungry. Go home, make your cakes with your small bit of flour and oil as you had planned. But before you eat make a cake for me, and after I have eaten the cake go ahead and make more cakes for you and your son. I promise you that you will not run out of food. Your jar of flour will not become empty and you will not run out of oil until the day that the Lord Yahweh sends the rains back to earth. She did as she was told, and she continued to make cakes day after day and the oil and flour never ran out.

Elijah lived in the house of the widow and her son. Several weeks after Elijah arrived at the widow’s house her son got very sick. He had trouble breathing and soon died.

The widow blamed Elijah. She said to him, “Why are you here? Did the Lord Yahweh send you here to cause trouble for me and cause the death of my son?”

Elijah responded, “Give me the boy.” The woman was holding her son. His head was on her shoulder. She passed the boy to Elijah, who carried him gently up the stairs to his own room and

carefully laid him on the bed. Then he cried out, "Lord Yahweh, why have you brought disaster to this woman? You told me to stay with her, and now her son is dead and I am being blamed for it."

Then he laid down on the child's body and cried out, "Lord Yahweh, my god, why have you killed this boy. Let this child live again, bring him back to life, restore him to his mother."

The Lord Yahweh heard Elijah's cry. Life came back to the boy and he revived. Elijah carried the boy downstairs and handed him over to his mother. Elijah said to the woman, "Your child is now alive." The woman replied gratefully, "Thank you. Now I know that you have been sent by the Lord Yahweh and what you told me is true."

Elijah lived with the woman a long time and during that time the famine was very severe throughout Samaria. The bread and the oil did not run out. After three years the Lord Yahweh spoke to Elijah and told him that the drought had gone on long enough. "Go to King Ahab," said the Lord Yahweh. "Tell him that the drought will soon be over. I will send rain across the whole land."

Elijah did as he was told.... sort of, anyway. He sent a message to King Ahab and told him that the Lord Yahweh was going to end the drought. The King summoned his palace administrator Obadiah and told him to head in one direction, and he the King would head in the other direction, to search for springs of water where they could find grass to keep the horses and mules alive until the rains came and the grass grew again. So Obadiah headed off in one direction and the King in another direction.

Obadiah encountered Elijah coming toward him down the road, recognized him as the prophet of the Lord Yahweh, and fell to

the ground in front of him as a sign of respect. "Is that really you, my lord Elijah?" he asked.

"Yes, it is I," Elijah answered. "Find your master the King and tell him that I am here waiting for him."

"What have I done to you that you would send me to get killed?" said Obadiah. "You know that King Ahab has searched everywhere for you, in this country and even in nearby countries. Everywhere that they tell the King that you are not there he requires them to swear an oath that they did not know where you were, on penalty of death. So now you expect me to go to the King and tell him that I found you wandering along a road? Before I get back the Lord Yahweh will send you somewhere else, and the King will kill me when he can't find you."

"You know, or at least the Lord Yahweh knows, that I have been faithfully serving the Lord Yahweh since my youth. You know that I never served Baal. You know that I saved hundreds of the priests of the Lord Yahweh by hiding them from Jezebel in groups of 50 in caves throughout the kingdom and had them provided with food and water. So why are you now putting my life in jeopardy?"

"Don't worry," said Elijah, "I swear before the Lord Yahweh, that I will be here when you return with King Ahab."

Obadiah found the King and told him that Elijah was waiting for him on a road out of town. The King went with Obadiah to where Elijah was waiting. "So, you troublemaker, finally we meet," said the King to Elijah.

"I am not the one causing trouble," said Elijah. "You are the troublemaker, by giving up the worship of the Lord Yahweh and following your wife's lead in worshipping Baal and building

temples to Baal in my country. So here's the deal, Ahab. Get the word to the people of Israel to meet at Mount Carmel. Bring those priests of Baal that you are supporting and all those prophets of Asherah that eat from the generosity of Jezebel, all 450 of them. Assemble them all at Mount Carmel tomorrow morning."

Ahab sent messengers throughout the land to tell the people to meet at Mount Carmel.

The next morning the people and the priests and prophets of Baal all assembled on the side of Mount Carmel. Elijah got up in front of them and spoke to them. "Listen to me. How long are you going to ignore the Lord Yahweh and follow these other gods who are not as powerful as Lord Yahweh and do not deserve your allegiance? The Lord Yahweh is the god of Israel. He is more powerful than Baal. I will prove it to you. If I can't prove it to you, then follow Baal."

The crowd was silent.

Elijah waited a moment, then continued. "I am the only prophet of the Lord Yahweh that is left in the land. There are hundreds of priests and prophets of Baal in this crowd. So let's see who can demonstrate the power of their god. Bring me two bulls."

The bulls were brought to Elijah.

"You, the priests and prophets of Baal, take one of these bulls," demanded Elijah. "There are two altars here. Cut up your bull and lay the pieces on the wood that has been prepared on the altar. Don't light the fire. Call on your Lord Baal to light the fire and burn the sacrifice. Then I will do the same. I will call on the Lord Yahweh and ask him to light a fire under my sacrifice. Whichever god answers with fire, and lights the sacrifice on his

altar, that will be the god who is most powerful and who deserves your respect. That god will be your god.”

The people agreed that was a fair test.

“You can go first,” said Elijah. “There are a lot more of you priests and prophets of Baal. Let’s see if you can get Baal to answer you.”

So the priests of Baal called on their Lord Baal all morning. Noon came and nothing had happened. The priests of Baal continued to walk around their altar, calling on the Lord Baal to send fire, but he remained silent.

Elijah began to make fun of them. “Shout louder,” he said, “He might have wandered off where he can’t hear you, or maybe he’s asleep and you need to waken him, or he is meditating somewhere.”

The priests of Baal continued to cry out to Lord Baal, with no results. They cut themselves until the blood flowed, and still the Lord Baal was silent. This continued until late afternoon.

Then Elijah got up in front of the crowd and spoke. “Come closer,” he said, “I will show you who is the most powerful god.” He repaired Lord Yahweh’s altar, since it had gotten damaged with the crowd of people milling around. He rebuilt it with 12 large stones, representing the 12 tribes that made up the Israelites. He dug a trench around the altar, piled wood on it, cut up the bull and placed the pieces of the bull on the firewood. When it was ready he demanded that four jars of water be brought to him. He had the water poured on the altar. Two more times water jugs were filled and poured on the altar so that the water flowed off the altar and filled the trench surrounding the altar.

As evening came and the sun set Elijah stood near the altar and said, "O Lord Yahweh, god of Abraham and Isaac and Israel, prove that you are Israel's god and I am your prophet, so that the people will worship you and abandon Lord Baal. Almost immediately fire fell from the sky and consumed the bull, the wood, the stones and finally the water that filled the trench.

The people were shocked. When they saw the raging fire fall from the sky and consume even the altar they fell on their stomachs with their faces to the ground. "The Lord Yahweh has won," they said, "he is really a god. He is powerful."

Elijah said to the people, "Seize the prophets of Baal. Do not let any of them escape."

The priests and prophets of Baal were all captured. Elijah had them taken to the Wadi Kishon, where they were executed.

Elijah then turned to Ahab and said to him, "It's time to party. Eat and drink happily because the priests of Baal have been killed, the Lord Yahweh is happy, and I hear the sound of rushing rain coming."

Ahab went back to his tent and ordered the party to begin. Elijah went up to the top of Carmel and sat down with his face between his knees. He said to his servant, "Look toward the sea." The servant looked and said to Elijah, "I don't see anything."

Every few minutes Elijah asked his servant to check again.

After the seventh time the servant said, "I see a little cloud no bigger than a person's hand rising out of the sea."

"The rains are coming," he said. Then he told his servant, "Go and tell Ahab, 'The rains are coming right now. Harness your

chariot and get back to the palace before the rain stops you and you get stuck in the mud.' "

In a little while the heavens grew black with clouds and wind and there was heavy rain. Ahab rode off quickly and went to Jezreel. Lord Yahweh gave Elijah super human strength, and he ran all the way back to Jezreel and beat King Ahab's chariot to the entrance to the city.

A *sacred pole* is believed to represent the tree of life that symbolized the female goddess Asherah, typically associated with fertility religion and often identified as the wife of Lord Yahweh.

The worship of Baal, which was largely condemned by the compilers of the Old Testament narrative through their editorial comment, was widespread in Canaanite culture and it had many adherents among the Israelites, who did not see a conflict with their primary god, the Lord Yahweh.

DO WHAT I TELL YOU – OR ELSE!

Now that he was King of Aram, thanks to Elijah publicly anointing him at the direction of the Lord Yahweh, Benhadad assembled a massive army from citizens of Aram and allies from nearby countries. He created a military alliance of 32 kings and princes of the smaller neighboring cities that felt threatened by the growing power of the northern Israelite Kingdom of Israel. The allied army consisted of hundreds of foot soldiers, cavalry and war chariots. This powerful army under the command of Benhadad launched an invasion against Samaria, capital of the Kingdom of Israel. He surrounded the city and laid siege to it so that no one could leave or enter the city. Soon the inhabitants of the city would run out of food and water.

Once his army was in place and had sealed the city, Benhadad sent a delegation of officers to meet with King Ahab under a temporary truce. The message was clear and threatening: “Benhadad demands the silver and gold from your treasury. He also demands that you turn over your wives and children as hostages. You have a choice—surrender these things or you will be destroyed, your city will be leveled, and we will take what we demand anyway.”

As soon as he saw the massive army surrounding Samaria, Ahab quickly decided that resisting would be unwise so he replied to the enemy messengers, "Tell King Benhadad, ‘As you say, my lord, O king, I am your humble servant. I will not oppose you. You can have what you have demanded from us. We will not resist. Just leave us in peace.’”

The messengers delivered the response to King Benhadad. “That was easy,” he thought, so he sent his messengers back to King Ahab, to tell him: “Yesterday I, King Benhadad, told you to bring your silver, your gold, your wives and your children to me,

but I have changed my mind. Tomorrow at about this time I will send my people to enter your city, and search your houses, and they will take whatever they want. You will let them take away anything of value, and you will not try to stop them.”

This time King Ahab thought that Benhadad had gone too far and was demanding more than he was willing to give to keep peace and save his city. He assembled the leaders of the city and told them the harsh facts—at first Benhadad had demanded the contents of the treasury and his wives and children and he had agreed in order to keep peace, but now Benhadad has demanded to take whatever he wants. He is determined to humiliate the city, and it is clear that he wants war. So what should he do?

The elders were united and firm in their position. “Refuse his demands. Do not surrender to him. We will fight for our city if we have to.”

So King Ahab told the messengers: “Carry this message back to your king. I was willing to meet your first demand in order to have peace. But this last demand I cannot and will not agree to.”

Ben-had was angry. He sent his messengers back to King Ahab to tell him, “May the gods destroy me if I do not keep my word to turn your city into nothing but dirt and dust by this time tomorrow.”

“Strong words,” King Ahab told the messengers. “But tell your king that a soldier who has not yet put on his armor should not brag of victory as if the battle were over and he was taking off his armor. We’ll see who wins this war. Save your bragging until you have won.”

Benhadad had been partying heavily with his fellow kings in the command tent, apparently celebrating his victory by drinking and getting pretty drunk, when he got the word that King Ahab had refused his demands. He ordered his troops to take their stations and begin the assault on the city.

Meanwhile back in Samaria a prophet of the Lord Yahweh approached Ahab and said to him, "The Lord Yahweh says for you to look around and see the huge army that is surrounding the city. It looks hopeless, but the Lord Yahweh is going to enter the battle on your side and give you a mighty victory over your enemies today just to show you that he is the god of gods, and it would be worth your while to follow him rather than Lord Baal."

Said Ahab to the prophet, "And just how is this supposed to work?"

The prophet responded, "Yahweh says that your victory will come at the hands of the young district governors of the land, who will lead the troops in battle."

Ahab then asked, "How will this occur? Who will start the battle?"

"The Lord Yahweh says you will start the battle with a surprise attack," said the prophet.

King Ahab called together the 232 young men who served as district governors, and the 7000 soldiers he had available in the city, and organized them into fighting units under the control of the district governors. They exited from the gate of the city at noon and marched quickly toward Benhadad's army. Benhadad and his friends were still partying, and by now they were quite drunk. Benhadad's scouts reported that there were armed men approaching their camp. Benhadad did not take them seriously, and told his scouts, "If they have come to surrender, bring them

to me alive. If they have come to fight, take them alive anyway and bring them to me.”

By that time it was too late. The Israelites attacked suddenly and fought ferociously. The Arameans fled from the field. King Benhadad escaped with his cavalry. The Israelites pursued the fleeing Arameans, slaughtering many of them as they ran. They had defeated Benhadad.

The prophet went back to King Ahab and said to him, “The battle is not yet over. Your victory is only temporary. You must strengthen the defenses of the city and prepare for another battle in the spring. He will come back to fight again.”

Back in Aram, King Benhadad’s advisors told him that he had made a tactical error and used the wrong strategy. They told Benhadad that the gods of Israel “are gods of the hills, and so they were stronger than we were. To defeat them we have to fight against them in the plain, and if we do, we will surely win the battle. Also you must remove the kings as commanders. They are not hardened soldiers, you need to put professional military officers in their place as commanders of the troops. Build a new army. Replace the horses and chariots you lost and we will fight against the Israelites in the spring, and this time we will defeat them.”

Benhadad listened to his advisors. In the spring Benhadad assembled another army, put it under the control of professional officers. He marched into the Kingdom of Israel but this time he set up his camp in a valley between the mountains.

The Israelites prepared for war. After the Israelite troops were assembled and the provisions for the battle had been gathered, they set out to engage the enemy. They camped close to the Aramean army. They looked like two little flocks of goats in the valley.

The Lord Yahweh sent a prophet to King Ahab, who told him, “I have a message from the Lord Yahweh. Because the Arameans think they are so smart because they know I am a god of the hills and not of the valleys, they think they can defeat you and I cannot save you because I do not have power and authority in the valley. I have news for them. They will find out that I have enough power to defeat them, and I will prove it to you, and you will know that I am the most powerful of the gods. I may live in the mountains but my power extends over the valleys as well.”

Both sides remained in their camps reluctant to start the battle, so the waiting continued. Finally on the seventh day the Israelites attacked and killed 100,000 of the Arameans, who fled the battlefield in defeat and retreated to the city of Aphek to make a stand. However the walls of the city collapsed suddenly and killed 27,000 of the Aramean soldiers who were camped just inside the walls.

Benhadad and some of his commanders were still hiding inside the city. His advisors told the king, “We are defeated, but we have heard that the Kings of Israel are merciful kings. If we wear sackcloth to show our shame and humiliation, and if we put ropes around our necks to symbolize our subservience, and if we go to the King of Israel and ask for mercy, there is a good chance the Israelites will spare our lives.”

So Benhadad did as he was advised. He put on sackcloth, and had his advisors do the same, and he sent his advisors to King Ahab with ropes around their necks, symbolizing their surrender. They told Ahab that Benhadad is willing to surrender and asked that his life be spared. King Ahab was surprised. “So your king is still alive?” asked Ahab. “If so, I will treat him with respect as a brother king. Bring him to me.”

They left Ahab's presence but returned a short while later with Benhadad, who was wrapped in sackcloth. Ahab invited Benhadad to climb up into his chariot to talk.

Benhadad said to Ahab, "In gratitude for letting me live, I will give back to you the towns that my father took from your father, and you may establish markets for your merchants in Damascus just as my father did in Samaria. We will be trading partners and friends and allies.

Ahab said, "OK, I accept your offer. We will have peace on those terms." So the terms were written into a peace treaty and after it was signed Ahab let Benhadad go in peace.

The Lord Yahweh was very angry that Ahab made peace with Benhadad. That was not the plan. The Lord Yahweh wanted Ahab to kill Benhadad.

At the command of the Lord Yahweh one of prophets of Lord Yahweh said to another, "Yahweh commands you to strike me!" But the man refused to strike him. Then he said to him, "Because you have not obeyed the voice of the Lord Yahweh, as soon as you leave here and go on your way a lion will kill you." Just as he had predicted, as soon as the man left his companions, a lion met him on the path and killed him.

Then the prophet found another man and said to him, "Strike me!" So the man hit him hard, striking and wounding him. Then the prophet got up, brushed himself off and bandaged his wounds. Then he left the group of prophets and waited for the king to come along the road on his way back to Samaria. The prophet disguised himself with a bandage covering part of his head.

As the king passed by, the prophet cried out to the king and said, "My Lord, I need your judgment. I am a soldier. I was fighting in

the thick of the battle when an officer brought a prisoner to me and said, 'Guard this man; if he is missing, your life shall be given for his life, or else you shall pay a talent of silver.' But the battle raged on and I was busy fighting, and suddenly the prisoner was gone."

The king of Israel said to him, "So shall your judgment be; you yourself have decided your fate when you admitted that you had let your prisoner escape."

Then the prophet quickly took the bandage away from his head. The king of Israel recognized him as one of the prophets. The prophet said to Ahab, "The Lord Yahweh sent me to give you a message: 'Because you let King Benhadad go away peacefully after I told you I wanted him killed, I will substitute your life instead of his, and I will see that your people are killed in exchange for your letting the Aramean people escape destruction.' "

The king of Israel stood in stunned silence, then slowly set out toward home, resentful and sullen at the punishment that Lord Yahweh had announced. Within a few days Ahab arrived back home in Samaria.

Interestingly, we learn that the Lord Yahweh is not as compassionate as King Ahab; justice, a primary value, is more important than compassion and requires revenge and punishment; and Yahweh's reach extends beyond the mountains of his origins.

NABOTH'S VINEYARD

Naboth owned a vineyard that was located next to the palace of King Ahab in Samaria. Ahab wanted that vineyard, so one day he went to Naboth and demanded that he give his vineyard to the king. Ahab told Naboth, "I want your vineyard for a vegetable garden. It is close to my house and quite convenient for me. I will give you a better garden somewhere else, or if you prefer I will give you cash for the vineyard."

Naboth did not want to give up his vineyard.

He said to Ahab, "It's my vineyard. I don't want to give it up. It's my land. It was my family's land before I owned it. It is my inheritance from my father and his father before him. I cannot and will not give you my ancestral land."

Ahab went home resentful and sullen because Naboth would not give up his family's ancestral land. When he got home he went immediately to bed. He turned away from anyone who entered his room and would not talk to them. He pouted. He sulked. He refused to eat. He was seriously depressed.

His wife Jezebel came to his room to see him, "Ahab, what's the matter with you? Why are you so depressed that you will not eat?" she asked.

He replied, "Because I spoke to Naboth and said to him, 'I want your vineyard.' I offered him money, or if he preferred, I offered to give him another vineyard, but he refused."

His wife Jezebel said to him, "Get up you stupid man, you are the king. You can have anything you want. Get up, eat some food, and be cheerful. I will see that you get Naboth's vineyard."

She wrote letters in Ahab's name and signed them with his seal. She sent the letters to the elders and nobles of Naboth's hometown, Jezreel. The letters ordered the elders to proclaim a religious festival and to make Naboth the ceremonial head of the feast and order him to sit at the head table. The letters also ordered the elders to seat two scoundrels at the table with him and pay them to publicly charge Naboth with treason. The letter said, "Instruct the scoundrels to stand up during the meal and shout at Naboth in front of all the guests, and loudly yell, 'You have cursed the Lord Yahweh and our King Ahab.' Then take him out, and stone him to death."

The leaders of Jezreel did as Jezebel had ordered in the king's name. They proclaimed a feast and seated Naboth at the head table. They hired two scoundrels to come in and sit at the table with him. During the dinner the scoundrels brought a charge against Naboth, in the presence of the people, shouting, "Naboth cursed our Lord Yahweh and the king." So the people took Naboth outside the city and stoned him to death.

The elders of Jezreel sent a message to Jezebel, that Naboth had been stoned to death and was dead.

As soon as Jezebel heard that Naboth was dead, she went to Ahab and told him, "Go, take possession of Naboth's vineyard. He is dead. He can't object." Ahab went to the vineyard and took possession of it.

But that was not the end of the story. The Lord Yahweh heard what Jezebel had done, so he sent Elijah to meet King Ahab at the vineyard and told him to tell Ahab, "The Lord Yahweh is not happy that you had Naboth killed and have stolen his vineyard: The Lord Yahweh wants you to know that in the same place where the dogs licked up the blood of Naboth, the dogs will lick up your blood as well."

Ahab said to Elijah, "Why have you come to cause trouble for me again?"

Elijah answered, "I came to see you again only to deliver a message from Lord Yahweh. You have brought trouble on yourself because you have done evil things. You cannot take a man's land from him. So the Lord Yahweh sent me to tell you, directly from him: 'I will bring disaster on you. I will destroy you. I will cut you off from all contact with your own people, and I will make your name disappear. You will not be remembered. You have provoked me to anger and that is the consequence.'"

"As for Jezebel the Lord Yahweh said, 'The dogs shall eat Jezebel within the city of Jezreel. Your relatives and friends who die in the city will be eaten by the dogs. Any of your relatives or friends who die in the open country shall be eaten by the birds of the air.'"

When Ahab heard the judgment that was pronounced against him, he tore his clothes and put sackcloth over his bare flesh. He fasted, he lay in the sackcloth, and he went about dejectedly.

Once the Lord Yahweh saw how dejected and sorry Ahab was, he came to Elijah and said, "Have you seen how sorry Ahab is for what he did, and how apologetic he is? Go and tell him I've changed my mind about his punishment. Since he has shown he was sorry for his behavior, I will not bring disaster on him while he lives—but after his death, in his son's days, I will bring disaster on his descendants."

In an agricultural society land was important and was passed down through the generations. Even a king had to respect land rights.

In this story, unlike the previous one in which Ahab suffered consequences for compassion toward Benhadad, the Lord Yahweh is portrayed as feeling sorry for Ahab and compassionately shifting the consequences of Ahab's wrongful acts to his descendants, to make them pay for Ahab's bad acts.

TELL ME WHAT I WANT TO HEAR

For three years there was peace between Aram and Israel. After three years of peace, King Jehoshaphat of Judah came to Samaria to meet with his neighbor Ahab, the King of Israel. During their meeting King Ahab said to King Jehosaphat, "A few years ago the King of Aram took the city of Ramoth-Gilead from us. We have not done anything about it, but it belongs to us and we would like to take it back. Will you join forces with me so we can get that city back in our kingdom?"

Jehoshaphat replied to the king of Israel, "Sure, I will join you against Aram. We are allies. My people are your people. My horses are your horses. We are brothers. However, just to make sure this is not a foolish venture, let's check with the Lord Yahweh to see if he will support us. We can ask the prophets."

Ahab called the prophets to a meeting, about four hundred of them, and said to them, "I need your advice. Shall I go to battle against the King of Aram to seize control of Ramoth-gilead or shall I refrain?"

They were unanimous. They told Ahab, "Go ahead and attack. The Lord Yahweh will give you a victory."

King Jehoshaphat was not convinced. He asked Ahab, "Isn't there another prophet of the Lord Yahweh who has a different view that we can ask?"

Ahab said, "Well, yes, there is still one other prophet that we could ask whether the Lord Yahweh will support an attack against Ramoth-gilead. His name is Micaiah, but I would rather not ask him. I hate him, because he never prophesies anything favorable about me. He only prophesies disaster. I don't like his negative attitude."

Jehoshaphat said, "You shouldn't say that. We should hear what he has to say."

Then Ahab summoned an officer and said, "Quickly, find Micaiah and bring him to me."

The two kings, Ahab and Jehoshaphat, were sitting on their thrones, arrayed in their royal robes, at the threshing floor at the entrance of the city gate of Samaria, amusing themselves watching the prophets dance around as cheerleaders for war.

The prophet Zedekiah made some bull's horns out of iron and he danced with the other prophets wearing the horns on his head and said, "The Lord Yahweh says that with these horns you shall gore the Arameans until they are destroyed." All the prophets were shouting their agreement and saying, "Attack Ramoth-gilead and you will triumph. The city will fall. The Lord Yahweh will give the city to you."

The messenger who had gone to summon Micaiah to meet with the two kings said to him, "Listen Micaiah, the words of the prophets are unanimous. They speak of victory and they say what the king wants to hear. Here's a bit of advice for you: you had better agree with them because the king does not want to hear any negative views."

Micaiah said, "Thanks for the warning, but I am going to tell the King what the Lord Yahweh wants me to tell him. That's my job."

The two kings were still watching the dancing prophets shouting their encouragement to go to war when Micaiah arrived and stood before Ahab and Jehoshaphat. King Ahab said to him, "Micaiah, shall we go against the city of Ramoth-gilead and get it back under our control, or shall we refrain? What is your view?"

Micaiah replied, "Attack the city and you will be victorious. The Lord Yahweh will give it to you."

King Ahab said to him, "Micaiah, I don't believe you. You are usually negative. How many times must I make you swear to tell me nothing but the truth when I ask you for advice from the Lord Yahweh?"

Micaiah said, "OK, my lord King, if you really want the truth, I saw the end result of the battle with all the Israelites scattered on the mountains like sheep that have no shepherd. The Lord Yahweh said, 'These people have no master now; let each one go home in peace.' "

The king of Israel said to Jehoshaphat, "I told you that he would not prophesy anything good. He is a troublemaker. He always brings gloomy messages to me. That's why I didn't want to ask him about going to war."

Micaiah said to the two kings, "Now hear the word from the Lord Yahweh: I saw the Lord Yahweh sitting on his throne, with all his army standing beside him to the right and to the left of him. The Lord Yahweh said, 'Who will entice King Ahab, so that he will attack and fail to win at Ramoth-gilead? Who will lead Ahab to fall in a battle that he cannot win?'"

"The members of Lord Yahweh's army said one thing, and another said something else until finally a spirit came forward and stood before the Lord Yahweh and said to him, 'I will entice him into a war.'"

"'How?' the Lord Yahweh asked him."

"The spirit replied, 'I will become a lying spirit. I will enter into all his prophets and I will speak lies through them to deceive King Ahab.'"

“‘Good plan,’ said the Lord Yahweh, ‘You are to entice him with deception, and you shall succeed because King Ahab wants to believe that he will be successful in battle. Go and do it.’”

“So you see, the Lord Yahweh has put a lying spirit in the mouth of all these your prophets to deceive you, so that he can bring disaster on you.”

Then the prophet Zedekiah, who was clearly upset by the words of Micaiah, stepped up to him and slapped him in the face and said, "How is it that the spirit of the Lord Yahweh passed from me to speak through you?"

Micaiah replied, "You will find out about who is speaking the truth on that day when the enemy has won and you have to hide from the enemy in an inner room of the palace."

The King of Israel then ordered his officers, "Take Micaiah, and send him to the governor of Amon, and tell Joash the king's son, to put this Micaiah in prison and feed him on reduced rations of bread and water until I come again victorious, having won the peace. I'll deal with him when I return."

Micaiah said, "If you return victorious, the Lord Yahweh has not spoken by me. The people are my witness."

So shortly afterwards King Ahab of Israel and King Jehoshaphat of Judah led their armies in an assault against Ramoth-gilead, which was defended by the King of Aram, who had seized it from Israel many years before.

The king of Aram told the thirty-two captains of his chariots, "Our fight is not with the Israelites. It is with King Ahab. Do not waste time fighting with just anyone. Seek out the King of Israel and kill him."

Ahab's secret agents heard that the Aramean soldiers had been told to hunt down Ahab and kill him. When they reported that information to Ahab, he devised a plan to save himself at the expense of his ally. Ahab said to Jehoshaphat, "the King of Aram is not expecting two kings against him. To deceive him I will disguise myself and go into battle as an ordinary soldier, but you wear your royal robes." Jehoshaphat agreed, so the king of Israel disguised himself and went into battle.

When the captains of the Aramean chariots saw Jehoshaphat, they shouted, "There is the King of Israel." So they turned to fight against him. When Jehoshaphat figured out that they had confused him with Ahab he cried out that he was Jehoshaphat. When the captains of the chariots saw that it was not the King of Israel, they turned back from pursuing him and continued to hunt for Ahab.

Then, as often happens in war, an accident occurred with an unintended consequence. An Aramean soldier fired an arrow and unknowingly struck the disguised king of Israel between the scales of his armor and the breastplate. He was severely wounded. He said to his chariot driver, "Turn around and carry me out of the battle, for I am badly wounded."

The battle grew fierce as the two sides struggled for control. The king was propped up in his chariot all afternoon facing the Arameans. At evening he died, the blood from his wound flowing into the bottom of the chariot. Then about sunset a shout went through the army, "The King is dead. Retreat. Every man return to his city. The battle is over."

King Ahab was brought back to Samaria, where he was buried. His chariot was washed by the pool of Samaria, the dogs licked up his blood, and the prostitutes washed themselves in the

blood that spilled into the pool, just as the Lord Yahweh had said.

There is more to the story of King Ahab, tales of the cities he built, and the house of ivory he built for himself, but these stories are all written down in the *Book of the History of the Kings of Israel*.

The compilers of the stories about the kings of the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah that are recorded in the Old Testament books relied on several lost written sources, several of which are referenced in the text, including the *Book of the History of the Kings of Israel*.

Ahab is not a very admirable or courageous figure, a conclusion we can draw from his attempt to deceive Jehoshaphat in order to protect himself.

LORD OF THE FLIES

King Ahaziah, who had assumed the throne of Israel after the death of King Ahab, had fallen through the lattice from an upper floor in his palace into the courtyard below and was seriously injured in the fall. He sent messengers to the *Lord of the Flies*, the god of Ekron, to ask whether he would recover from his injury.

The Lord Yahweh heard about Ahaziah's inquiry to the god of Ekron and sent a messenger to the prophet Elijah to say, "Elijah, go immediately to meet the messengers of King Ahaziah, who are on the road to Ekron, and say to them, 'You already have a god in Israel. Why are you heading to Ekron to ask the king's fate from a foreign god? Isn't the Lord Yahweh good enough for you? So, you wanted to know the king's fate—here it is. You can go home and deliver the news to your king. Because you ignored the Lord Yahweh and sent messengers to Ekron to consult with the *Lord of the Flies*, the Lord Yahweh says you will not survive your fall. You will die.'"

The messengers returned to Ahaziah. "Why have you come back so soon?" asked Ahaziah.

"We met a prophet on the road," they told Ahaziah, "and he told us to go back and tell you, 'Isn't the god of Israel good enough for you? Did you forget that Israel has a god? Why are you ignoring the Lord Yahweh and running off to the *Lord of the Flies* in a foreign land? Because you ignored the Lord Yahweh you will not leave your bed. You will die.'"

"Who told you this?" asked Ahaziah.

"A hairy man, with a leather belt around his waist, met us on the road," said the messengers.

“It was the prophet Elijah!” said the king, and he immediately ordered one of his captains to take the fifty soldiers under his command and to go get Elijah and bring him to the palace.

The captain found Elijah sitting on a nearby hillside, went up to him and demanded that Elijah return with him to King Ahaziah. Elijah refused, and said, “Let fire come down from the sky and consume you and your men.” Immediately, fire came from the sky and destroyed the soldiers.

Ahaziah sent another captain, with another fifty men, who said to Elijah, “Prophet of the Lord Yahweh, the king commands you to come with me. You are under arrest.”

Elijah replied, “If I am a prophet of the Lord Yahweh, let fire come down from the heavens and destroy you and your men.” Again the fire came and consumed the captain and his men.

Ahaziah sent a third captain and another fifty soldiers to arrest Elijah. The captain, very much afraid, dropped to his knees in front of Elijah and begged him, “Prophet of the Lord Yahweh, spare my life and the life of my men. I know that fire from Lord Yahweh destroyed those who came before me. Please don’t do the same to me.”

A messenger from the Lord Yahweh told Elijah, “Go with him to the King. You do not need to be afraid. Nothing bad will happen to you.” So Elijah returned to the palace with the captain.

When they came into the presence of the King, Elijah repeated the earlier message directly to the king’s face: “You have ignored the Lord Yahweh. Isn’t the god of Israel good enough for you? Because you sent messengers to Ekron to the *Lord of the Flies* to inquire about your fate, you will not leave your bed, you will die in it.”

And so he died, just as the prophet Elijah said.

Lord of the Flies is the literal translation of Baal-zebub, identified as the god of Ekron. It is probably an intentional insult, referring to the flies associated with cattle dung. This is the source of the title of Golding's novel of the same name.

CHARIOTS OF FIRE

The prophet Elijah and his disciple and successor Elisha were traveling together on the road from Gilgal, walking toward Bethel, when Elijah stopped and said to Elisha, "Stay here. The Lord Yahweh told me to travel to Bethel alone."

Elisha said to his companion, "No, while the Lord Yahweh lives, and while you live, I will not leave you." So they traveled together to Bethel. A large number of prophets of the Lord Yahweh lived in Bethel and they came out to meet the two men. They asked Elisha, "Do you know that today is the day that the Lord Yahweh plans to take your master away from you?"

Elisha said, "Yes, I know. I don't want to talk about it."

Elijah turned to him and said, "Elisha, stay here, because the Lord Yahweh has sent me to Jericho and I want to travel alone."

Elisha said to him, "As I told you before, while the Lord Yahweh lives, and while you yourself live, I will not leave you."

They continued the travels to Jericho. Once again the prophets of Yahweh who were living at Jericho met them, and said to Elisha, "Do you know that today the Lord Yahweh intends to take your master away from you?"

"Yes," said Elisha, "I know, but I don't want to talk about it."

Elijah said to Elisha, "Stay here and wait, because the Lord Yahweh has sent me to the Jordan River."

Once again, Elisha said to him, "Elijah, I told you before, I will not leave you." So the two men traveled on to the Jordan River.

Fifty local prophets of Yahweh went with them but waited some distance away when they reached the Jordan. Elijah took off his robe and rolled it up and struck the water with it. The water of the river separated to each side, creating a dry path in the

middle of the river, so that the two men crossed to the other side on dry ground.

When they had crossed, Elijah said to Elisha, "I am going to leave you now. Tell me what I can do for you before I am taken from you."

Elisha told him, "Please let me have double your power."

Elijah responded, "You have asked a lot. But maybe you will get that power. If you see me as I am being taken from you, your wish will be granted. If you do not see me depart from you, your wish will not be granted."

As they continued walking and talking together, a chariot of fire drawn by horses of fire suddenly appeared and separated the two men from each other. Elijah got into the chariot, which ascended in a whirlwind into the sky.

Elisha watched in amazement and cried out, "My father Elijah! What is happening? I see the flaming chariots of Israel and its horsemen!"

As the chariot climbed into the sky it appeared smaller and smaller and then Elisha could no longer see the chariot as it disappeared. He stood quietly for a short time staring into the sky. Then he grabbed hold of his robe and tore it into two pieces. He picked up the robe of Elijah that had fallen from him as he departed and then went back and stood on the bank of the Jordan. He took Elijah's robe in his hands, and struck the water, saying, "Where is the Lord Yahweh, the God of Elijah?" Just as he struck the water, it parted to the side and once again Elisha crossed over the river on dry land.

The prophets had been watching from a distance. They had seen the parting of the waters and the flaming chariot that had taken Elijah into the sky, and Elisha causing the river to separate so

that he could cross on dry land, and they declared, "The spirit of Elijah rests on Elisha."

The prophets came to meet Elisha and bowed to the ground before him. They said to him, "Elisha, we have fifty men here. We need to find Elijah and see what happened to him. Send us to look for him. It may be that the spirit of the Lord Yahweh picked him up in a tornado and threw him down again on some mountain or into some valley nearby. We need to find him."

Elisha responded, "No, there is no point in looking for him."

They kept begging him to let them look for Elijah, so eventually he relented and said, "Go ahead and look for him. The fifty men searched for three days but did not find him. When they finally came back to Elisha, who had gone to Jericho, he said to them, "I told you not to go, you would not find him."

Elisha left Jericho and headed toward the shrine of Yahweh at Bethel. Just as he started on his way some small boys came out of the city and made fun of him and taunted him, saying, "Go away, baldy! Leave our city, old man!" Elisha turned to look at the gang of tormenters and when he saw them, he cursed them. "Damn the lot of you," he said, "May the Lord Yahweh punish you for your insolence!" Immediately two bears charged out of the woods and attacked the boys, seriously mauling 42 of them. So Elisha had his revenge.

Elisha demanded twice the magical power of Elijah, and the Lord Yahweh grants it. Then we see him use that power rather arbitrarily to punish young boys who made fun of him as he left the city. Human nature seems not to have changed very much in 2500 years!

GREEDY SERVANT GETS HIS REWARD

Naaman, commander of the army of the king of Aram, was a powerful man and well-liked by his master. He was a mighty warrior and respected by the king but he suffered from leprosy.

On one of their raids against Israel the Arameans had taken a young girl captive and she was given to Naaman as a servant for his wife. The young girl said to her mistress, "If only my lord Naaman could visit the prophet who lives in our capital Samaria, the prophet of the Lord Yahweh would cure him of his leprosy."

Naaman went to the king and told his lord what the girl from the land of Israel had said. The king of Aram said, "Go to Samaria, Naaman, and I will send a letter with you to the king of Israel."

Naaman traveled to Samaria with an entourage, taking with him a large quantity of gold and silver coins and ten suits of clothes as gifts. He also brought a letter to the king of Israel, which read, "When this letter reaches you, please know that I have sent to you my servant Naaman, commander of my army, that you may cure him of his leprosy."

When the king of Israel read the letter, he tore his clothes in fear and distress and said, "Am I a god in control of life and death, that the King of Aram sends word to me to cure his officer of his leprosy? He must be trying to pick a quarrel with me to give him an excuse so that he can send his army to conquer us."

But when Elisha, prophet of the Lord Yahweh, heard that the king of Israel had torn his clothes in distress, he sent a message to the king, "Why are you so upset that you have torn your clothes? Send Naaman to me and I will show him that there is a prophet of the Lord Yahweh in Israel."

So Naaman came with his horses and chariots and his entire entourage, and halted at the entrance of Elisha's house. Elisha remained in his house but sent a messenger to tell Naaman, "Go, wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored and you shall be clean."

Naaman became angry and went away, saying, "I thought that for someone as important as me he would come out of his house, and stand and call on the name of the Lord Yahweh, his God, and would wave his hand over the spot and cure the leprosy! We have two clean rivers in Damascus, why should I wash myself in the waters of Israel?" He stormed away angrily.

His servants came up to him and said, "Master, if the prophet had commanded you to do something difficult, wouldn't you have done it? So why not do what he suggests when all he said to you was, "Wash in the Jordan, and be clean of your disease?"

Naaman calmed down, and after he thought about it, he went to the river and immersed himself seven times in the Jordan, according to the instructions of the prophet of Lord Yahweh. Immediately his flesh was restored like the flesh of a young boy and he was clean from leprosy.

Naaman returned to the home of the prophet of the Lord Yahweh, with his entourage. He stood before Elisha and said, "Now I know that there is no more powerful god in all the earth than in Israel. I have brought you gifts in gratitude. Please accept these gifts."

Elisha replied, "In the name of the Lord Yahweh, whom I serve, I did this. I will accept nothing from you!"

Naaman urged him to accept his gifts, but Elisha refused. Naaman then said, "If you will not accept my gifts, then please give me two mule-loads of earth from Israel, because I will no

longer offer burnt offerings or sacrifices to any god except the Lord Yahweh. I want to sacrifice to Lord Yahweh on his own soil. However your Lord Yahweh will have to pardon me on occasions when my master the King goes into the sacred house of our god *Rimmon* and I have to go with him and bow down before the image of the god *Rimmon* in his temple. So please understand and forgive me for that."

Elisha said to Naaman, "I understand. Go in peace."

After Naaman left, Elisha's servant Gehazi, thought to himself, "My master Elisha has let that Aramean Naaman off too lightly by not accepting the gifts he offered. I will run after him and get something out of him." So Gehazi quickly followed after Naaman's entourage and caught up with him. When Naaman saw someone running after him, he jumped down from the chariot to meet him and said, "Is everything all right?"

Gehazi answered, "Yes, everything is fine but my master has sent me to say, 'Two prophets have just come down from the hill country of Ephraim and they need financial help. Please give them a bag of silver coins and two suits of clothes.'"

Naaman said, "Please accept two bags of silver coins, and he tied up the silver in two bags with two suits of clothes and gave them to two of his servants, who carried them back to the city. When Gehazi arrived at the citadel, he took the bags from Naaman's servants and stored them inside, and then dismissed the servants and they left.

Then Gehazi reported to his master. Elisha said to him, "Where have you been, Gehazi?"

He answered, "I have not gone anywhere at all."

Elisha responded, "Not true, Gehazi! Did you forget that I can go with you in spirit and see where you have been and what you are doing? I am aware that you followed Naaman and he left his chariot to meet you. Is this a time to accept money and clothing, olive orchards and vineyards, sheep and oxen, and male and female slaves? Therefore the leprosy of Naaman shall be your leprosy and your descendants forever will be lepers."

Immediately Gehazi was infected with the disease. He left Elisha's presence as white as snow.

Leprosy was much feared in the ancient world. Usually those with leprosy were expelled from their city and were considered social pariahs, forced to live by begging at the city gate. It is interesting that the King of Aram held Naaman in high esteem and made him the commanding general of his army.

Little is known about the god *Rimmon*, but the reference is probably to the Syrian god known as *Ramanu*, a god of storms, lightning and thunder, whose name literally translated is "the Thunderer."

REVOLT AND REVENGE

The prophet Elisha called to one of his fellow prophets and said to him, "I have an important job for you. Take this flask of oil and go to Ramoth-gilead. When you arrive there look for Jehu, the son of Jehoshaphat. He will be seated in a meeting of high ranking military officers. Take him away from those at the conference table, to another room. Then take the flask of oil, pour it on his head, and say, 'Thus says the Lord Yahweh: I anoint you king over Israel.' Then get out quickly, do not hang around."

The young prophet took the flask of oil and went to Ramoth-gilead. He arrived while the army officers were meeting in council, and he announced, "I have a message for you, commander."

"For which one of us?" asked Jehu.

"For you, commander," said the young man, "it's confidential."

So Jehu got up and went inside. As instructed, the young man poured the oil on Jehu's head and said, "The Lord Yahweh, the God of Israel, sends this message: 'I anoint you king over the people of Israel. You shall strike down the house of your master Ahab, so that I may avenge on Jezebel the blood of my servants the prophets and of all those who worshipped me and were killed by Jezebel. All of Ahab's household and descendants will die. The dogs shall eat Jezebel in the territory of Jezreel and no one shall bury her.'" Then he opened the door and fled.

When Jehu came back to the conference room where the king's officers were meeting, they said to him, "Is everything all right? Why did that mad prophet come to see you about?"

He answered them, "Nothing much. You know how those old prophets babble."

They said to Jehu, "Liar! What's this about? What did he tell you? Why did he interrupt our meeting? Come on, tell us!"

"All right," said Jehu, "If you really want to know. He poured oil on my head and said to me, 'I have come from the Lord Yahweh to anoint you king over Israel.'"

The officers got up from the table and spread their coats on the floor in front of him. They ordered the trumpet blown and they loudly proclaimed, "Jehu is king."

So Jehu said to his fellow officers, "If it is your wish that I be king, then we will have to seize power. Send soldiers to guard the gate. Don't let anyone out of the city. We must keep this conspiracy quiet until we have control."

Then Jehu mounted his chariot and went to Jezreel, where King Joram had been taken to heal from the wounds he had received in battle against the King of Aram. Joram's ally, King Ahaziah of Judah, had come to Jezreel to visit him.

In Jezreel a sentinel on the watch tower saw Jehu's chariot approaching at high speed. He reported it to the king. "Send a horseman to meet him and inquire whether he comes in peace," ordered the king. The horseman galloped out the city gate and asked Jehu if he was coming in peace.

"That's not your concern," said Jehu, "fall in behind me."

The sentinel was watching the approach and reported back to the king that the horseman reached the chariot, but he was not returning.

The king sent a second horseman, who approachd Jehu's chariot and said that the king demanded to know if he was coming in peace. He also was told to mind his own business and fall in with the other horseman.

The sentinel reported that the horseman reached the chariot, but he is not returning and instead was following the chariot—"But," said the sentinel, "he is driving that chariot like a maniac. He is driving like Jehu."

King Joram ordered his chariot to be brought to him. Then he and King Ahaziah of Judah set out, each in his chariot, and went to meet Jehu. They met him at the property of Naboth the Jezreelite. As Joram approached Jehu, he said, "Do you come in peace, Jehu?"

Jehu answered, "What peace can there be, so long as the prostitution of our religion continues throughout Israel led by your mother Jezebel, with her worship of Baal and her evil magic."

Then Joram turned his horse and fled, shouting to Ahaziah, "Treason, Ahaziah, run!"

Jehu drew his bow with all his strength and shot at Joram, hitting him between the shoulders, so that the arrow pierced his heart, and he sank in his chariot.

Jehu said to his aide, "Drag him out of his chariot and throw him on the plot of ground belonging to Naboth the Jezreelite. Remember, when you and I rode side by side behind his father Ahab, how the Lord Yahweh promised that 'the blood of Naboth and the blood of his children, will be revenged on this very plot of ground.' Now throw him on the plot of ground, as the Lord Yahweh promised."

When King Ahaziah of Judah saw this, he fled but Jehu pursued him with a few soldiers, yelling, "Shoot him also!" The soldiers caught up with him and shot him in his chariot. Ahaziah fled to Megiddo and died there. His officers found him and carried him in a chariot to Jerusalem, and buried him in his tomb with his ancestors.

King Jehu then marched to Jezreel. Jezebel heard he was coming. She put on makeup, painted her eyes, and put her crown on her head, and looked out of the window, waiting for Jehu to arrive. As Jehu entered the city gate, she shouted from her window, "Is it peace, you murderer of your master?"

Jehu looked up to the window and said, "Who is on my side? Anybody?" Two or three eunuchs looked out at him. He told them, "Throw Jezebel from the window." So they threw her down. Some of her blood splattered on the wall and on the horses, which trampled on her body.

Then Jehu went into the palace and ate and drank. After he had eaten he said to the servants, "Go outside, find that horrid Jezebel's body in the courtyard and bury her properly, for she is a king's daughter." When they went to bury her, they found no more of her than her skull and the feet and the palms of her hands. When they came back and told Jehu, he said, "This is just as the Lord Yahweh said, which was told to us by his servant Elijah, when he said that 'at Jezreel the dogs shall eat the flesh of Jezebel and the corpse of Jezebel shall be like cow manure in the fields so that no one can identify her body and say, this is Jezebel.' "

The "prophets" of the Lord Yahweh are shown in these stories as having extraordinary power and authority in political events. Whether or not that reflects historical reality is unknown.

I'M SO HUNGRY I COULD EAT THE CHILDREN

The King of Aram and the King of Israel continued to fight each other. Sometimes Aram won, other times Israel won. After a short period of peace King Benhadad of Aram once again mustered his army, marched against Samaria, and laid siege to the city. The siege continued for many months, and as it dragged on and the inhabitants of Samaria could not get to their crops or import food into the city. The scarcity of food caused prices to rise and famine and starvation to spread throughout the city.

During the long siege the poor suffered greatly. Even a donkey's head to make soup sold for several coins of silver and a handful of dove's dung to make a cooking fire was beyond the reach of many. One day the king of Israel was walking on the city wall surveying the increasingly desperate situation when a woman cried out to him, "Help, my lord king!"

In frustration he called down to her, "No, lady! Let the Lord Yahweh help you now. I can't. There is nothing more I can do. Can I produce grain from the threshing floor when there is no grain or wine from the presses when there are no grapes?"

Then, feeling a bit more compassionate, the king asked her, "What is your complaint?"

She answered, "We are starving. My neighbor said to me, 'Give up your son. We will eat him today, and we will eat my son tomorrow.' So we cooked my son and ate him. The next day I said to her, 'It is your turn to give up your son and we will eat him.' But she has hidden her son."

The king was shocked and upset by the words of the woman. He was upset that he could do nothing about the desperate situation. In anguish he tore his clothes—and since he was

walking on the city wall, the people could see that he had sackcloth on his body underneath his clothes.

"Damn that Elisha," the king said. "He's the cause of our trouble. So may the Lord Yahweh do to me and more, if the head of Elisha remains on his shoulders. By the end of the day I will kill him."

The king sent an officer to arrest Elisha and bring him to face the king. When the officer arrived Elisha was sitting in his house with the elders of Israel. Before the messenger arrived, Elisha had said to the elders, "Are you aware that this murdering king has sent someone to take off my head? When the officer of the king comes, see that you shut the door in his face and hold it closed against him. The king will be right behind him."

While he was still speaking with them, the king himself arrived at Elisha's door. "Elisha," he said, "this trouble we are in, this suffering and starvation, all is from the Lord Yahweh. Why should we make offerings to him, or listen to what he says, or place our hope in him? The Lord Yahweh is not helping us, he is causing us grief."

"Not so fast, my king," said Elisha. "The Lord Yahweh tells me that by this time tomorrow plenty of food will be available for the people at the city gate. A good meal will be bought for a quarter and two pounds of flour will cost a dime."

The captain who had come to Elisha's house with the king, and who had intended to arrest Elisha, said to him derisively, "Even if the Lord Yahweh were to open the windows in the sky, what you say is impossible. It cannot happen."

"Captain," said Elisha, "It will happen tomorrow just as I said. You will see it with your own eyes, but you will not get to eat from the plentiful food that will be available. You will see."

Meanwhile, sitting just outside the city gate there were four men with leprosy. Their situation was desperate because they were beggars and no one had anything to share with them. One of them said to the others, "Why should we just sit here until we die? Here are our options. If we enter the city either the famine will kill us or the people will. If we sit here and do nothing we will die of starvation. So our only chance is to desert to the Aramean camp. If they spare our lives, we shall live; and if they kill us, we shall but die. So we are no worse off if we go there, and there is a chance we could live."

His friends agreed that made sense so at twilight they left the city gate and walked toward the Aramean camp. When they arrived at the edge of the camp it was dark and they got a surprise. There was no one there. The camp was empty and the soldiers were gone. As dark had fallen the Lord Yahweh had caused the Arameans to hear the sound of many chariots and horses, the sound of a great army approaching. They concluded that the king of Israel had hired the kings of the Hittites and the kings of Egypt to fight against them and they were vastly outnumbered. They fled from what they thought was an approaching army and abandoned their tents, their horses, and their donkeys, leaving behind their camp and their supplies, and ran for their lives.

The lepers were surprised. They went into the first tent they came to and found plenty of food. They ate well and they drank, and they carried off silver, gold, and clothing, and went and hid them. Then they came back, entered another tent, carried off things from it, and went and hid them.

Then they said to one another, "What we are doing is wrong. This is a day of good news. If we are silent and wait until the morning light, all of Israel will know that the Arameans have left and abandoned their supplies and we will be found guilty of

failing to let our suffering people know there is food here. We must go and tell the king."

They returned to the city. They called to the gatekeepers of the city and told them what they had found, "We went to the Aramean camp," they said, "but there was no one to be seen or heard there, nothing but the horses and donkeys tied, and the tents were empty. Everyone was gone."

The gatekeepers reported the news to the king's staff. The king got up in the night and said to his advisors, "It's a trick. The Arameans know that we are starving so they have left their camp and they are hiding in the open country, thinking, 'When the Israelites come out of the city and are eating in our camp, we will take them by surprise and get into their city without having to continue our siege.' "

One of the king's advisors said, "Let some men take five of the remaining horses, since if they stay here they will die anyway along with the rest of us. Send them to their camp and find out if they are really gone."

Two mounted men and a few horses left the city to find out if the Arameans were gone. They went as far as the Jordan River, and the whole way to the river was littered with garments and equipment that the Arameans had thrown away in their haste to escape. They returned to the city and told the king that the Arameans were nowhere to be found and their camp was abandoned.

When they heard the news that the Arameans had left and abandoned their food and supplies, the desperate people rushed out the gate of the city and plundered the camp of the Arameans. The army captain who had accompanied the king was on duty in charge of the gate and as the crowd of people rushed out to raid the Aramean camp, he was trampled to death

in the stampede. Just as Elisha had said, the plentiful supply of food resulted in the surplus being sold at the city gate for just a few cents and the captain, who said that an abundance of food being available cheaply at the gate was impossible, saw the abundance of food with his own eyes but did not eat any of it because he was trampled to death at the gate.

This story, as is true for several others, seems to have been told to promote the legitimacy of the prophets as carriers of the voice of the Lord Yahweh and to warn the citizens of the dangers of not listening to what the prophets told them.

GIVE A MAN ENOUGH ROPE ...

Ahasuerus, King of Persia, ruled over a powerful kingdom that stretched from India to the borders of Egypt. To demonstrate his power and wealth he gave a huge week-long royal banquet for all the people of his capital city, Susa. The banquet was held in the courtyard of the king's palace, which was decorated with white cotton curtains and blue hangings tied with cords of fine linen and held by silver rings to the marble pillars. There were couches of gold and silver on a mosaic pavement of porphyry, marble, mother-of-pearl, and colored stones. Drinks were served in golden goblets and the royal wine was poured generously from flagons without limit. It was a great party and all were having fun.

On the seventh day of the banquet, when the king was happily drunk with wine, he commanded the seven eunuchs who waited on him to bring Queen Vashti to him, wearing her royal crown, in order to show her off to the people and the officials, for she was one of the most beautiful women in the kingdom. Queen Vashti was holding her own party and refused to come at the king's command. The king was enraged when he heard that the Queen had rejected his order.

Ahasuerus consulted with the wise men of the court and his counselors who knew the laws and asked them, "According to the law, what is to be done to Queen Vashti because she did not obey my command conveyed by the eunuchs?"

One of his advisors replied, "My Lord King, this is a serious offense. Not only has Queen Vashti done wrong to the king, but also to all the officials and all the peoples of the empire. All women everywhere will hear about the Queen's refusal, and if she gets away with this affront to the king, it will cause women everywhere to think they can disobey their husbands and the

social structure will collapse. This very day the noble ladies of Persia and Media who have heard of the queen's behavior will rebel against the king's officials, and there will be no end of trouble!

"If it pleases the king," the advisor continued, "let a royal order go out from the king, and let it be written among the laws of the Persians and the Medes so that it may not be altered, that Vashti is never again to come before King Ahasuerus. Reduce her status as queen and give her royal position to someone else who is better behaved than she, so when the decree made by the king is proclaimed throughout all his kingdom, vast as it is, all women everywhere will give honor to their husbands."

That advice pleased the king and the officials, and the king sent letters to all the royal provinces, to every province in its own script and to every people in its own language, declaring that every man should be master in his own house and his women were to obey him.

The order having been given, the king's servants said to him, "You need a new queen. Let us find beautiful young virgins for the king. The king should appoint commissioners in all the provinces of his kingdom to gather all the beautiful young virgins to the harem of the king in the palace of Susa under the custody of Hegai, the king's eunuch, who is in charge of the harem. Make the girls beautiful. Give them cosmetic treatments. Then the king can sample the girls one at a time, and the one who most pleases the king shall be queen instead of Vashti."

"Good idea," said the king, so he ordered it done

There was a Jew in Susa whose name was Mordecai, a descendant of Jews who had been taken away from Jerusalem to Babylon many years before. Mordecai had an adopted daughter, Esther, whom he took into his house when her mother

and father had been killed. The girl had grown into a beautiful young lady, and she was selected for the harem.

Hegai, the eunuch in charge, liked Esther and he provided her with beauty treatments and the best of the food, assigned seven maids to her, and gave her the top spot among the ladies of the harem. After a year of preparation with treatments of oil of myrrh, and perfumes and other cosmetics, she was ready for the king. Each girl in turn went to the king in the evening to spend the night with him and returned the next morning to the second harem and she never went in to the king again unless he asked for her by name.

Esther's turn to spend the night with the king finally came. He was attracted to her and immediately fell in love with her and made her his queen.

King Ahasuerus gave an official banquet in honor of his new queen, and he gave out gifts with generosity and declared a public holiday. Mordecai had been sitting at the King's gate, waiting for the festivities to begin, when he overheard two of the king's eunuchs who were in charge of access to the king plotting to assassinate the king. Mordecai told Esther, who told the king. After an investigation which proved the plot the king ordered the two eunuchs to be hanged.

King Ahasuerus then promoted Haman, one of the court officials who was very wealthy, as his deputy and put him in charge of all the other officials. All the king's officials and servants who were at the king's gate bowed down in obedience to Haman except for Mordecai. He would not bow to Haman.

The other officials said to him, "Mordecai, why did you disobey the king's command to bow before Haman to show him respect and acknowledge that he is next in command under the king?" He did not answer except to say that he was a Jew, but

whenever Haman came to the gate Mordecai would not bow to him. So the other officials reported to Haman that Mordecai would not bow to him.

Haman was furious when he heard the report, but he decided to take no direct action against him since Mordecai was the Queen's stepfather. But when he learned that Mordecai was a Jew he developed a plan to get rid of Mordecai indirectly with a plot to destroy all the Jews in the kingdom.

Haman told King Ahasuerus, "There is a certain people scattered and separated among the many peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom whose laws are different from those of every other people and they do not respect the king or obey the king's laws. It is not appropriate for the king to tolerate these people. If it pleases the king, let a decree be issued for their destruction. If that is done I will pay \$10 million in silver coin to the king's treasury to cover the cost."

The king took his signet ring from his hand and gave it to Haman and told him, "Do whatever you want to." The king's secretaries were summoned to write an edict, to write what Haman commanded, and the order was sent to the governors of all the provinces, to every province in its own script and every people in its own language. Letters were sent by couriers to all the king's provinces, giving orders to kill and annihilate all Jews, young and old, women and children, and to plunder their possessions on the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, the same day in all the provinces. A copy of the document was to be issued as a decree in every province by proclamation, calling on all the peoples to be ready for that day of destruction.

When Mordecai learned about the edict to kill all the Jews, he tore his clothes and put on sackcloth and ashes, and went through the city, wailing with a loud and bitter cry. In every

province, wherever the king's command and his decree came, there was great mourning among the Jews, with fasting and weeping and lamenting, and most of them lay in sackcloth and ashes.

When Esther's maids and her eunuchs came and told her, the queen was deeply distressed. She sent garments to clothe Mordecai, so that he might take off his sackcloth, but he would not accept them. Then Esther called for Hathach, one of the king's eunuchs, who had been appointed to attend her, and ordered him to go to Mordecai to learn what was happening and why. Hathach met Mordecai in the open square of the city in front of the king's gate, and Mordecai told him all that had happened to him and the exact sum of money that Haman had promised to pay into the king's treasuries for the destruction of the Jews. Mordecai also gave him a copy of the written decree issued in Susa for their destruction, that he might show it to Esther, explain it to her, and charge her to go to the king to plead for the lives for her people.

Hathach went and told Esther what Mordecai had said. Then Esther gave him a message for Mordecai, saying, "I can't get to the king. All the king's servants and the people of the king's provinces know that if any man or woman goes to the king while he is inside the inner court without being called, the law requires that all alike are to be put to death. Only if the king holds out the golden scepter to someone, may that person live. I have not been called to come in to the king for thirty days."

When Mordecai heard the message from Esther he sent another message to the queen, "Do not think that just because you are the queen that you will escape any more than all the other Jews. If you keep silent at such a time as this, you as well as your father's family will perish."

Esther said in reply to Mordecai, "Gather all the Jews in Susa and hold a fast on my behalf. Do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my maids will also fast as you do. After that I will go to the king, though it is against the law. If I perish, I perish."

Mordecai then went away and did as Esther had ordered him.

On the third day Esther put on her royal robes and stood in the inner court of the king's palace, opposite the king's hall. The king was sitting on his royal throne. As soon as the king saw Queen Esther standing in the court, he held out to her the golden scepter that was in his hand. Then Esther approached and touched the top of the scepter.

The king said to her, "What is it, Queen Esther? What is your request? Whatever you ask I will give to you, even to half of my kingdom."

Esther said, "If it pleases the king, let the king and Haman come now to a banquet that I have prepared for the king."

The king said to one of his officers, "Bring Haman to me quickly, so that we may do as Esther desires." So the king and Haman joined Esther at the banquet she had prepared. While they were drinking wine, the king said to Esther, "What is your request? Whatever it is shall be granted to you."

Then Esther said, "This is my request. If I have won the king's favor, and if it pleases the king to grant my petition and fulfill my request, let the king and Haman come tomorrow to the banquet that I will prepare for them."

Haman left the dinner that day happy and in good spirits and passed by the king's gate. When Haman saw Mordecai seated in the king's gate, and observed that he neither rose nor trembled

before him, he was infuriated with Mordecai, but he held his temper and went home. Then he sent for his friends and his wife. Haman bragged to them about the amount of his riches, the number of his sons, all the promotions with which the king had honored him, and how he had advanced above the other officials and ministers of the king. Haman added, "Even Queen Esther let no one but myself come with the king to the banquet that she prepared. Tomorrow also I am invited by her, together with the king. Yet I am angry and frustrated because I see the Jew Mordecai sitting at the king's gate and he will not respect me."

His wife said to him, "Build a gallows fifty cubits high and in the morning tell the king to have Mordecai hanged on it. Then go with the king to the banquet in good spirits." His friends agreed. So Haman had the gallows made.

That night the king could not sleep. Something was troubling him, so he gave orders to bring the book of records and they were read to the king. He discovered that it was Mordecai who had told the king's officials about the two eunuchs who had conspired to assassinate the king.

In the morning Ahasuerus asked the palace officials, "What honor or award was given to Mordecai for reporting this plot and saving my life?" The king's officials said, "Nothing was done for him."

The king said, "Who is in the court right now?"

Haman had just entered the outer court of the king's palace to speak to the king about having Mordecai hanged on the gallows, so the king's servants told him, "Haman is there, standing in the court."

The king said, "Ask him to come in."

So Haman came in, and the king said to him, "What suggestion do you have for what I should do for a man whom I want to honor?"

Haman thought to himself, "Whom would the king wish to honor more than me?" So Haman said to the king, "For the man whom the king wishes to honor, let royal robes be brought, which the king has worn, and a horse that the king has ridden, with a royal crown on its head. Let the robes and the horse be handed over to one of the king's most noble officials. Have him put the robe on the man whom the king wishes to honor and let him conduct the man on horseback through the open square of the city, proclaiming before him: "This man is being honored by the King.'"

Then the king said to Haman, "Good plan. It shall be done. Quickly, take the robes and the horse and do exactly what you said for the Jew Mordecai who sits at the king's gate. Do everything for him that you suggested."

Haman was stunned, but out of fear he did as he was ordered. He took the robes and the horse and put the robe on Mordecai and led him riding through the open square of the city, proclaiming, "This is the man whom the king wishes to honor."

Then Mordecai returned to the king's gate, but Haman rushed to his house, mourning and with his head covered in shame.

When Haman told his wife and his friends what had happened to him, his advisers and his wife said to him, "If Mordecai is a Jew, you are in big trouble."

While they were still talking with him, the king's eunuchs arrived and hurried Haman off to the banquet that Esther had prepared. The king and Haman went in to dine with Queen Esther. On the second day, as they were drinking wine, the king again said to

Esther, "What is your request, Queen Esther? Whatever you want, I will grant."

Then Queen Esther answered, "If I have won your favor, O king, and if it pleases the king, I request my life and the life of my people. For we have been sold for a sum of money, I and my people, to be destroyed, to be killed, and to be annihilated."

"Who is he," asked the king, "and where is he, who has presumed to do this evil thing?"

Esther said, "It was done by an enemy of our people, this horrible man Haman who sits here with us!"

Haman was terrified. The king rose from the dinner very angry and went into the palace garden. Haman stayed to beg his life from Queen Esther, for he saw that the king was very angry and had determined to destroy him. When the king returned from the palace garden to the banquet hall, Haman had thrown himself on the couch where Esther was reclining, still pleading with her.

Shocked at his behavior, the king said, "Will he even assault the queen in my presence, in my own house?" As the words left the mouth of the king, a servant covered Haman's face. Then one of the eunuchs in attendance on the king, said, "Look, the very gallows that Haman has prepared for Mordecai, whose word saved the king, stands at Haman's house, fifty cubits high." The king said, "Hang him on that." So they hanged Haman on the gallows that he had prepared for Mordecai. Then the anger of the king abated.

Esther told the king that Mordecai was her stepfather. The king summoned Mordecai, and gave him the signet ring which he had taken from Haman. Mordecai was made second in authority to the king. Then she fell to the feet of the king, crying and

pleading with the king to stop the plot of Haman to kill all the Jews. The king held out the golden scepter to her, so she got up and stood before the king. "If it pleases the king," she said, "let an order be written to revoke the order devised by Haman to destroy the Jews throughout the kingdom."

King Ahasuerus said to Queen Esther and to her father Mordecai, "I have given Esther the house of Haman, and they have hanged him on the gallows, because he plotted to lay hands on the Jews. You may write as you please with regard to the Jews, in the name of the king, and seal it with the king's ring. An edict written in the name of the king and sealed with the king's ring cannot be revoked."

The king's secretaries were summoned and an edict was written, as Mordecai dictated, to the governors and the officials of all the provinces from India to Ethiopia, to every province in its own script and to every people in its own language. The edict was carried by mounted couriers riding on fast horses bred from the royal herd. By these letters the king allowed the Jews who were in every city to assemble and defend their lives, and to destroy, to kill, and to annihilate any armed force of any people or province that might attack them, and to take their possessions. In every province and in every city, wherever the king's command and his edict came, there was gladness and joy among the Jews, a festival and a holiday. Furthermore, many of the peoples of the country now claimed to be Jews, because they feared the revenge which the Jews might take on the people who were not Jews.

A *eunuch* was a castrated male, generally before puberty, most often appearing in the Near East, particularly in Babylonia and Persia, where they performed functions as courtiers, commonly as guardians or servants in the harem (where their presence would not result in an embarrassing pregnancy).

THE WRITING ON THE WALL

The Babylonian king Belshazzar ruled a great empire and was very wealthy. To display his wealth and power and impress his friends and courtiers he held a great festival for hundreds of the nobility and officials of his kingdom. Belshazzar and his guests had been drinking heavily and had gotten very drunk. The king ordered his servants to bring him the gold and silver drinking goblets that his father Nebuchadnezzar had seized when he had captured and destroyed Jerusalem many years before and had taken many of its leading citizens to Babylon as captives. He thought it would impress his guests if they drank out of gold and silver cups taken from the temple of Lord Yahweh.

The goblets were distributed to the guests, who drank from them and laughed as they partied and sang praises to the many gods of Babylon, particularly gods made of silver and gold, and the gods of iron, wood and stone as well. They were having a very good time.

Suddenly the banquet hall became quiet. The guests watched silent and fearful as the fingers of a human hand appeared and began to write on the wall of the palace. The king watched the hand as it slowly wrote words in a strange language he did not understand. He became pale. His knees were trembling. He was terrified.

"What does this mean?" cried out the king. No one answered him.

"Bring me the wise men of Babylon. Bring the enchanters and the magicians, the Chaldeans and the diviners," he demanded. "Whoever can read this writing and tell me its interpretation shall be clothed in royal purple and I will give him a chain of gold

to put around his neck. I will make him the third most powerful man in the kingdom."

All the king's wise men came to Babylon from all over the kingdom to try to solve the mystery of the writing, but they could not read it or tell the king what the words meant.

King Belshazzar was confused and frightened and his courtiers and advisors were perplexed. The queen had overheard the king and his lords anxiously discussing the strange writing on the wall. She came into the banquet hall and said, "O king, live forever! Don't worry. You don't need to fear the mysterious writing. I know a man here in your palace who is endowed with a spirit of the gods. When your father was king he found this man to have wisdom like the wisdom of the gods. He talks to the gods. He understands them. Your father, King Nebuchadnezzar, made him chief of the magicians and fortune tellers because he had exceptional knowledge and was able to interpret dreams, explain riddles and solve problems. His name is Daniel. Call Daniel. He can explain this writing to you."

The king listened to his wife and ordered Daniel to be brought to him. The king said to Daniel, "So you are Daniel, one of the Jewish exiles of Judah that my father the king brought from Judah? I have heard that you are wise and enlightened and that the spirits of the gods live in you. I had all the wise men and the magicians of my kingdom brought to me to read this writing and tell me its interpretation, but none could tell me what it means. I have heard that you can interpret dreams and solve mysteries. If you are able to read the writing and tell me its interpretation, I will clothe you in royal purple garments, and give you a chain of gold to hang around your neck, and I will make you third in command of my kingdom."

Daniel answered the king, "Keep your gifts or give them to someone else! Nevertheless I will read the writing to you and let you know what it means. The writing is a message from *God Most High*, who gave your father Nebuchadnezzar kingship, greatness, glory, and majesty. Because of the greatness that he gave him, all peoples, nations, and languages trembled and feared before him. He killed those he wanted to kill, he kept alive those he wanted to keep alive, he honored those he wanted to honor and he crushed those he wanted to crush."

"Later in his rule when your father became arrogant and forgot his duty to *God Most High*, he was deposed from his throne and his glory came crashing down. He was driven from human society and he became insane. He became a madman and his mind became like that of an animal. He lived with the wild asses, he was fed grass like oxen, he lived in the woods in the cold and rain, until he learned that *God Most High* rules over the kingdom of mortals and determines whom he wishes to rule over kingdoms.

"You, Belshazzar, his son," Daniel continued, "have not acted with humility even though you knew all this! Your arrogance will be your downfall. You have unwisely challenged the lord of the heavens! You dared to bring the wine goblets from his temple into this banquet hall, and you and your lords, your wives and your mistresses have been drinking wine from them. You have praised the gods of silver and gold, of bronze, iron, wood, and stone, which do not see or hear or know, but *God Most High* who gave you your power, you have dishonored.

"So the hand was sent from *God Most High* and this is the writing that was written on the wall: *MENE, TEKEL, PARSIN*. Here is what it means: *God Most High* has limited the days of your kingdom and he will now bring it to an end; you have been weighed on the scales of justice and you have been found

lacking and you will now pay the price for that; and your kingdom will be divided and given to the Medes and Persians."

Belshazzar was not happy with the news, but he kept his promise. After Daniel gave him the interpretation of the words on the wall Belshazzar gave the command to clothe Daniel in purple robes. A chain of gold was put around his neck and Belshazzar issued a proclamation that Daniel now ranked third in authority in the kingdom.

That very night Belshazzar was killed. Darius, King of Persia took over the Babylonian kingdom.

In this story we have intentionally broken from our consistent use of *Lord Yahweh* as the name for the god of the Israelites, in favor of *God Most High*. There are a number of personal names for god mentioned throughout the Hebrew bible but they generally refer to the god of Israel in distinction from the gods of other nations in the polytheistic Near East. However in this story *God Most High* signifies a broadening of the concept from the tribal god of Israel to a chief god who rules all the gods as head of the pantheon. The implication is that the god of Israel is the god of gods, the chief god, and as the highest of the gods he controls the events of history and makes demands on the leaders of all nations.

Daniel is a folk hero. According to the tradition he was among the Jewish nobility captured in the fall of Judah and taken to Babylon as a young man. The tradition says that he was a eunuch, trained in the mystical and magic tradition of the Babylonians, who gained favor with the king through skill and intelligence and was made an official.

THE LION KING

Daniel had just been given authority as third in the chain of command over Babylon when Belshazzar was killed and Darius became king. Darius, King of Persia, had built a very large empire by force of conquest. He was a capable manager who segmented his empire into 120 administrative units, each under the control of a local administrator and then aggregated the administrative units into three large groups, with a governor over each group. Daniel became one of the governors.

Daniel had a positive attitude and a cheerful outlook and because he was a capable administrator Daniel was noticed by Darius and commended for his capable management. It was clear to the other governors that Darius favored Daniel and they heard a rumor that Darius was leaning toward appointing Daniel as his deputy, to be second in command with responsibility to administer the whole kingdom.

That idea did not please the other managers, so they conspired together to find a reason to undermine Daniel in the eyes of Darius. They tried to find some corruption to blame on him but Daniel had been an honest and loyal administrator and they could not find anything to charge him with.

His fellow administrators pretty much agreed, as one of them said, "We are not going to find anything that he has done wrong as manager, so we will have to find something to accuse him of related to his worship of his God."

Several of the Persian officials met to plan a trap for Daniel. They went to the king and said, "O King Darius, live forever! All your administrators, the prefects and the satraps of the Kingdom, your advisors and the governors are agreed that the king should establish a new law and strictly enforce it, that

whoever prays to anyone, divine or human, for thirty days, except to you, O king, shall be put to death by being thrown into a den of lions. Publish the law and sign it, so that according to the ancient law of the Medes and the Persians, it cannot be revoked."

Therefore King Darius signed the document and published the law. Even though Daniel knew that the document had been signed, he continued to go to his house, which had windows in its upper bedroom open toward Jerusalem, and get down on his knees three times a day to pray to his god, the Lord Yahweh, just as he had done previously.

The conspirators came to Daniel's house, looked through the window and saw Daniel praying to the Lord Yahweh. Then they approached the king and said, "O king! Did you not sign a law that anyone who prays to anyone, divine or human, within thirty days except to you, O king, would be punished by being thrown into a den of lions to be killed?"

Darius answered, "The law stands just as I wrote it and according to the law of the Medes and Persians, it cannot be revoked."

Then the conspirators reported to the king, "Daniel, one of the exiles from Judah, has ignored your law and pays no attention to you or to the proclamation you signed. He continues to pray to his god the Lord Yahweh three times a day."

When the king heard the charge against Daniel he got very upset. He was determined to save Daniel, and until the sun went down he made every effort to find a way around the law, but the law was clear, once it had been published, it could not be revoked.

Frustrated that the king did not immediately arrest Daniel, the conspirators went back to the king and said to him, "I think you

know, O king, that it is the law of our nation that no law or ordinance that the king establishes can be changed even by you."

Seeing no alternative, the king gave the order and Daniel was thrown into the den of lions. As a large rock was being rolled up to seal the entrance to the den, King Darius said to Daniel, "May your Lord Yahweh, whom you so faithfully serve, deliver you from your fate!" The entrance was closed and the king sealed it with his own signet and with the signet of his lords, so that all were on notice that it was sealed by the king's order and no one could change the death sentence given to Daniel or rescue him from the den.

Darius was upset that he had been tricked into proclaiming a law that led to Daniel being executed. He returned to his palace. He did not eat. He could not sleep. At daybreak the king got up and hurried to the den of lions. When he got close to the den where Daniel was, he cried out anxiously, "O Daniel, servant of the Lord Yahweh, has your God whom you faithfully serve been able to deliver you from the lions?"

Daniel shouted from inside the den, "O king, live forever! My God, the Lord Yahweh, sent his messenger who shut the lions' mouths so that they would not hurt me, because I am innocent of any wrongdoing. Before you, O king, I have done no wrong."

King Darius was very happy that the Lord Yahweh had spared Daniel's life and he commanded that Daniel be taken up out of the den. So his soldiers rolled away the rock from the mouth of the den and Daniel was released. He had not suffered any harm or injury because the Lord Yahweh had protected him from harm.

The king then got his revenge. He commanded that those who had plotted against Daniel and tricked the king with their

malicious law and devious plot were to be arrested and thrown into the den of lions—they, their children, and their wives. Before they reached the bottom of the pit the lions overpowered them and tore them apart.

King Darius wrote a letter to all peoples and nations of every language throughout the whole world: "May you prosper and have an abundance of riches! I decree that throughout my empire all people should tremble and fear before the Lord Yahweh, the god of my viceroy Daniel: For the Lord Yahweh is a living god who endures forever. His kingdom shall never be destroyed and his territory has no end. He delivers and rescues from harm, he works signs and wonders in the sky and on earth, and he has saved Daniel from the power of the lions."

This story contains historical references but many inaccuracies. The Persian emperor Darius did not immediately follow Belshazzar. The *Book of Daniel*, which recounts the story of this heroic figure, is generally considered to have been written several centuries after the time of Darius, during the Maccabean period of Jewish history under the reign of Antiochus Epiphanes.

Daniel is a folk hero, a faithful Jew who is loyal to Yahweh, held up as an example during the period when Antiochus was introducing Hellenistic religious practices into Israel. His story was intended as an encouragement to Jews to maintain faithfulness to Yahweh and reject the attractive options of the Hellenistic era.

MAN OVERBOARD

The Lord Yahweh went to Jonah and said to him, "I have a job for you. I want you to go immediately to Nineveh, the great capital city of Assyria, and give them a warning. Tell them that I have heard about the evil things that are going on there and I am very upset that such evil is happening in that city and I intend to do something about it."

Jonah did not want to go to Nineveh, so rather than do what he was told, he fled to where Lord Yahweh could not find him. He went to the port of Joppa, found a merchant ship going to Tarshish, paid his fare and went on board, hoping to get beyond Lord Yahweh's territory.

Shortly after the ship sailed from Joppa the Lord Yahweh discovered that Jonah was on that ship trying to escape his order to go to Nineveh, so he caused a violent storm in the vicinity of the ship with winds so strong that the ship was in danger of capsizing and sinking.

The sailors were afraid the hurricane force winds would break up their ship. They were very frightened. They began to cry out to their various gods to save them. But they were also practical, so they tried to lighten the load by throwing the cargo overboard.

Jonah had gone down below the deck into the hold of the ship where he had found a quiet place and was fast asleep. The captain woke him up and said to him, "Why are you sleeping while we are trying to save the ship? You need to help us. Get up and call on your god! We have all prayed to our gods in hope that one of them will stop the storm. Now it is your turn to pray. Perhaps your god will protect us from the sea so that we do not die."

The sailors were talking among themselves when one of them said, "Maybe someone on the ship has offended the gods. Let's find out who it is. Let's cast lots to determine who is responsible for this storm." So they cast lots and the lot fell on Jonah.

The sailors said to Jonah, "Stranger, tell us why this calamity has come upon us. Who are you? What is your occupation? Where are you from?"

"I am a Hebrew," he replied. "I worship the Lord Yahweh, the God of the sky, who made the sea and the dry land." When they heard about Jonah's god the men were even more afraid and said to him, "What have you done to make the Lord Yahweh so angry?" Jonah told them that he was running away from the Lord Yahweh because he did not want to go to Nineveh with bad news for the city.

"So what do we have to do to get Lord Yahweh to end the storm and calm the seas?" they asked him.

Jonah replied, "This is all my fault. The storm would not have occurred if I had not tried to run from Lord Yahweh. Throw me into the sea. Then the Lord Yahweh will cause the storm to subside and the waters to be calm again."

The sailors were reluctant to throw him overboard. They took down the sails and began to row as hard as they could to get the ship back to land. The storm continued and got even stronger and the winds blew more fiercely. The scared sailors then cried out, "O Lord Yahweh, this is not our fault. We don't want to die. We are innocent. Please don't force us to kill Jonah because that would make us guilty of murder and bring blood revenge on us." The Lord Yahweh did not answer them, but the storm kept getting stronger.

So, in fear for their lives and in fear of the Lord Yahweh, the sailors finally said, “Alright, Lord Yahweh, lord of the sea, we will do what you wish.” So they grabbed Jonah and threw him into the sea.

Immediately the wind stopped and the waters became calm.

While Jonah was struggling in the water, the Lord Yahweh sent a huge fish that swallowed him whole. He survived in the belly of the fish three days and three nights, all the time praying to the Lord Yahweh to save him from the fish and from the depths of the sea, and if he did, he promised Lord Yahweh he would do his duty and follow Lord Yahweh’s instructions.

The Lord Yahweh decided that Jonah had been punished sufficiently so he instructed the fish to take Jonah to the shore. The fish headed toward the shore and spit Jonah onto dry land. Once Jonah was on land, the Lord Yahweh said to him, “Now, do what I told you to do. Go to Nineveh, and deliver a message for me. Tell the people that I am really upset with their behavior and I intend to destroy the city in forty days.”

Reluctantly, Jonah traveled to Nineveh. It took Jonah two weeks to get there and he discovered it was a huge city and it took another three days to walk across it. As Jonah walked through the city he cried out repeatedly, “Because of your evil ways, in forty days Nineveh will be overthrown!” The people of Nineveh took him seriously, and whether a city leader or an insignificant peasant, everyone put on sackcloth as a sign of remorse for their bad behavior. When the news reached the king of Nineveh he got up from his throne, removed his royal robe, dressed himself in sackcloth, and sat down in ashes.

Then the king issued a proclamation that said, “By the decree of the king and his nobles, no human being or animal, no herd or flock, shall eat anything until further notice. They shall not feed,

nor shall they drink water. Human beings and animals alike shall dress in sackcloth, and they shall plead with the Lord Yahweh to spare the city. Everyone must immediately end their bad behavior and stop the violence that has been rampant in the city. Maybe if we do, the Lord Yahweh may change his mind and maybe he will not be angry enough to destroy us."

When the Lord Yahweh saw that people throughout the whole city ended their bad behavior and their violence, he changed his mind about destroying the city. Jonah was furious with Lord Yahweh. "This is just what I figured would happen," he said to Lord Yahweh, "and this is precisely why I ran away and did not want to deliver this message. You have embarrassed me. You are too merciful, too willing to overlook evil ways if people say they are sorry. This is too humiliating. I came all this way for nothing. So I want to die. You can take my life right here and now."

"Seriously, Jonah, you're angry with me?" asked Lord Yahweh.

Jonah walked out of the city into the countryside east of the city and after he had rested awhile he made a shelter from the branches of trees and sat under it while he waited and watched to see what would happen to the city. He still expected the city to be destroyed. The Lord Yahweh caused a large bush to grow quickly to provide shade for Jonah so that he could remain cool and comfortable. Jonah was very happy about having the bush to keep him cool, but when dawn came up the next day, the Lord Yahweh sent worms to attack the bush and cause it to wither and die suddenly. When the sun rose, Lord Yahweh caused a hot and sultry east wind to blow and the sun to beat down on Jonah's head so that he became sick from the heat and asked that he might die.

He said to Lord Yahweh, "There is nothing for me to live for. I went around prophesying doom and destruction. You have made me look like a fool. I'm better off dead than alive."

But the Lord Yahweh responded to Jonah, "Do you think you have any reason to be angry about the death of the bush?"

"Yes," said Jonah.

"You are concerned about the bush, for which you did not labor and which you did not grow. It grew overnight and it perished in a day," said Lord Yahweh. "So why are you upset that I care about the great city of Nineveh, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people and lots of animals? Think about it, Jonah!"

The location of *Tarshish* is not known. Scholars have speculated, using various bits of evidence, that it may be in southern India or coastal Spain. The phrase "ships of Tarshish" is sometimes used generically to mean large trading ships. Wherever it is, Tarshish represents a faraway place where Jonah thought the Lord Yahweh could not find him.

Casting lots was an ancient method of divining answers from the gods, not unlike drawing names out of a hat. In this instance, by whatever precise methodology we do not know, Jonah's name was selected.

The story reflects an emerging concept among Jews of that time that the Lord Yahweh was not a local deity, that his reach was widespread and that he cared about people other than the Jews.

GOOD GOD! ... OR NOT

Once upon a time long ago in a place far away to the East lived a man named Job. He was a very important man, well respected and very rich. He had everything a man could want—seven sons and three daughters, 7000 sheep, 3000 camels, 500 teams of oxen, 500 donkeys and dozens of servants.

His sons had their own estates and they held regular feasts at each other's houses in a continuous round of parties. The sons took good care of their sisters and always invited them to these parties, to eat and drink with them and have a good time.

Job was a religious man. Every so often during quiet periods between the rounds of parties Job would offer sacrifices to Lord Yahweh on behalf of himself and his family—he took no chances just in case anyone in his family had inadvertently offended Lord Yahweh. He would rise early in the morning and offer burnt offerings and sacrifices, with the smoke curling upwards to the heavens.

He was very happy. By all accounts of his neighbors and friends he was a good man. Everything was going well for him—until one day, when Lord Yahweh held a meeting with the various heavenly beings and minor gods. Satan showed up at the meeting, and the Lord Yahweh asked him, “Satan, I haven't seen you around lately. Where have you been?”

“I've been down below, walking around on earth to see what was going on.”

“So,” said Lord Yahweh, “did you run into my friend Job? There is no one quite like him, a good man who fears and respects me, performs sacrifices and makes offerings to me, obeys my rules, lives a good moral life and stays out of trouble.”

"Yeah," I saw him," said Satan. "I don't understand why you think he is so great. Of course he respects and obeys you and makes burnt offerings to you. He is well paid. You protect him and his family from harm. You have made him rich and famous. Why wouldn't he do what you want him to do? Who wouldn't, in that situation?"

"But," said Satan. "He is only obedient and grateful to you while you continue to reward and protect him. If you take away all those nice things you've given him he will curse you to your face!"

"I don't think so," said Lord Yahweh. "But let's see which of us is right about him. Go ahead, take from him what he has and you will see that he still will be loyal to me. Just don't hurt him."

"Deal!" said Satan, who abruptly left the meeting and went to see what trouble he could cause.

A few days later while Job's sons and daughters were eating and drinking in the eldest brother's house, a messenger rushed up to Job and said, "Sir, the oxen were plowing and the donkeys were feeding beside them in the field when the Sabeans attacked the herdsmen without warning and killed them all and carried away the oxen and the donkeys, and I am the only one who got away."

While the first messenger was still speaking, another messenger came to Job and said, "I was helping guard the sheep with the other shepherds in the pasture when fire fell from the sky and burned up the sheep and the other shepherds and they were all killed. I am the only one who escaped."

Immediately after a third messenger rushed in to Job and said, "Babylonian raiders attacked from three sides and raided the herd of camels and carried them back to Babylon. They killed

the servants who were guarding them and I alone have escaped to tell you."

While that messenger was still speaking, a fourth messenger came and told Job, "Your sons and daughters were eating and drinking in your eldest son's house when suddenly a great swirling wind came across the desert and struck the house and it collapsed and everyone in the house is dead, and only I escaped to tell you."

Job was stunned. He went into mourning. He shaved his head. He tore his robe. Then he fell on his face on the ground and cried out, "I came into this world naked, and I will leave this world naked. The Lord Yahweh gives one day, and takes away the next day. But he is our god and we have to accept the good and the bad."

Job did not show anger and he did not blame Lord Yahweh for his misfortune.

A short time later the heavenly beings were at another meeting, and Lord Yahweh said to Satan, "Looks like I won our bet. Job is still loyal to me despite the fact that you destroyed his family and took away his wealth."

"Not so fast," said Satan. "I took away his possessions and his children, but so far I have not injured him. People can't tolerate pain. They will do anything to save themselves from pain. So, Yahweh, if he suffers pain you will see that he will curse you to your face."

"I don't think you are right—but he's all yours, Satan, do to him whatever you wish. You have my permission, except that you may not kill him," said Lord Yahweh.

So Satan caused Job to have terribly painful sores all over his body from his head to his toes. Job took a broken piece of pottery and sat in the ashes of his sorrow and humiliation, and in his pain he scraped his sores with the broken edge of the pottery.

Job's wife was angry. "Why do you persist in defending Lord Yahweh when he has caused these terrible things to happen to you?" she said. "Curse him so he will kill you and end your suffering."

Job replied, "You speak as a foolish woman would speak. Shall we receive good things at the hand of Lord Yahweh and not receive bad things also? The good and the bad are all part of life."

So Job remained loyal to Lord Yahweh.

Three of Job's friends dropped by to console and comfort him. Job was a mess. They could hardly recognize him with his torn clothes and body ravaged with sores. They saw how far he had fallen in such a short time from great wealth to sickness and poverty. Tears of sorrow ran down their faces. They tore their own robes to show their sympathy and support. They sat on the ground with Job in silence for seven days and nights to share his suffering.

Finally Job spoke. "Damn the day I was born," he said, "If I had never come out of the womb to see the light of day or if I had been stillborn, I would not have suffered the horror that my life has become. If I were dead I would sleep in peace and lie with the kings and the powerful and the free who have gone before me, with the slave who no longer has to fear his taskmaster, with the great and the small who are happy to find themselves in their graves. Death would provide an end to my suffering. I

am innocent. I suffer but I am not guilty. I cannot rest in peace. Undeserved suffering has become my burden."

"Job, you do not understand," said his friend Eliphaz. "Please don't be offended but there is something I have to say. Listen to me. In the past, when things were going well, you spoke with wisdom, but now that bad things have come, you are impatient. The innocent do not suffer or die without a reason. No one is innocent before the Lord Yahweh—not even his own servants and messengers are innocent. Misery and suffering are earned.

"If I were you I would beg the Lord Yahweh for mercy because this suffering is from him. He is very powerful. He makes it rain and it floods the fields. He makes people powerful and wealthy, and he brings them to ruin. He takes the weak and powerless and suddenly he makes them powerful and they rule over others. He frustrates the work of the skilled so that they fail in their work. He strikes men and injures them, then he bandages them and heals them. You can't figure it out, it is just that way. Live with it. Stay loyal to Lord Yahweh, and in the end you will be safe, you will have many descendants to remember you and your life will be long. We know this is a fact of life, Job, so accept it from a friend as wisdom from our experience."

Job answered his friend, "I wish that you could weigh the terrible things that have happened to me against any possible wrong that I could have done to Lord Yahweh—the scale would be very much out of balance. The Lord Yahweh is treating me unfairly. I wish he would grant me one last request—I want to die and even in the pain of death I will be happy because I have done nothing wrong. But he won't let me die. Yes, I am very angry.

"Why should I be strong and patient and keep silent and endure this endless misery and suffering at the hand of Lord Yahweh?"

Job continued. "No one will help me. You, my friends, won't support me because you are afraid of Lord Yahweh. You are afraid of his anger, so you blame me for my troubles rather than him. Can you show me anything that I have done to deserve the horrible things that have happened to me? If you can, then I will apologize to you and to Lord Yahweh.

"The life of man is not worth much. Life is short and full of hardship. Man labors just to survive day by day. What I earn is taken away from me. I have months of unhappiness and misery. When I go to bed I have no idea whether I will wake up in the morning. Disease, suffering and death are the lot of mankind. Even death does not help, because those who go to the underworld in death do not rise again and they are forgotten. So I will not keep my mouth shut. I will no longer suffer in silence. I will complain loudly from my bitterness and despair. I know it won't do any good, however, and in the end I will lie buried in the ground and you will seek me but I shall cease to exist."

Then his friend Bildad answered Job, "How long are you going to keep claiming that you are innocent? Do you think that Lord Yahweh is unfair? If your children sinned against Lord Yahweh he gave them what they deserved. If you plead with Lord Yahweh, and if you really are upright and free of wrongdoing, then he will restore you to your rightful place in life. Learn from history. Didn't our ancestors teach us that the good are rewarded and the evil are punished? The Lord Yahweh is not unfair. He does not forget the innocent and he does not reward those who are evil. So in the end, if you are truly innocent, you will get your reward."

"How do I plead my case before the Lord Yahweh? How can I even get his attention," said Job. "He moves mountains and commands the sun and shakes the earth from off its four pillars.

Who am I to complain to him and say to him, ‘Hey, what are you doing to me?’ Even though I am innocent I can’t really state my case. I will just have to seek mercy from him and I will have to be careful with my words not to offend him. There is no chance he will answer me. If it is a contest of strength I will be crushed and surely I cannot demand justice from him. If I protest my innocence, he will use my protest against me as a sign of my guilt. That makes me bitter and resentful. The fact is that he destroys the innocent along with the guilty. He laughs at my misfortune. It is pretty obvious to me that evil wins over good. There is no umpire who can decide between us. All the power is on his side. If we were on equal terms I could demand fairness and I would win.”

“If I could say what I wanted to Lord Yahweh,” Job continued, “I would tell him ‘I hate my life and I will not stop complaining about the unfairness of what has happened to me. I am bitter. I want to know why you are destroying me, a good man, and rewarding those who are evil. You made me out of clay and now you are destroying the best of what you have made and you return me to dust again. That just does not make sense. If I am evil tell me where I am wrong and punish me. I am humiliated and disgraced and you are not responding to me. My days are few, so now leave me alone and let me find a little comfort before I descend into the land of gloom and darkness from which no one returns.’”

Suddenly there was a crash of thunder and a roaring windstorm, and the booming voice of the Lord Yahweh broke into the silence, “Who the hell do you think you are to question me and what I do? You know nothing and you dare to question me? Stand up and face me like a man, and answer me! Did you forget who I am? Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? Who laid its cornerstone? Where were you when I made the morning stars, and the vast oceans, and the clouds

that cover the earth? Have you become so smart that you now know everything there is to know? Do you know where I store the snow and the hail, or why the winds blow, or who cuts a channel in the sky so the rains will flow and the lightning will get through?

“Job, can you chain the Pleiades to the mountains, or loosen the ropes that bind Orion, or affect the seasons? Can you cause it to rain, or send the lightning, or count the clouds? Are you as smart and as powerful as me that you dare to question my actions?”

Job was stunned by the anger of the Lord Yahweh. After the Lord Yahweh spoke, Job replied weakly, “I know you can do anything you want and there is nothing that I can do about it. I am sorry, I really am. I did not mean to offend you. I realize this is not about me and my innocence, it is about you and your power.”

Then Lord Yaweh turned to Job’s friends and said to them, “Guys, I am pretty angry with you. You did not provide good or helpful advice to Job. He had it right, you did not. You told him his suffering was all his fault, that if he had been worthy everything would work out fine for him, and because he was suffering he must have deserved what he got. That’s not true. This is a world in which the innocent suffer. Too bad, but that’s the way it is. It is not about you, it is about me and my power to do whatever I want.”

“So,” he continued, “You owe Job an apology. I want you to take seven bulls and seven rams, go to Job and offer a burnt offering to me in front of him, as a public apology to acknowledge you were wrong to blame him for what happened to him. I remind you again this is about me and my power and not about Job and his guilt or innocence. Don’t blame the victim. Job is a good man and he will pray to me and ask that I not treat you the way

you deserve to be treated for all the stupid things you said to him.”

So the friends went to Job and sacrificed to Lord Yahweh in front of him. Job asked Lord Yahweh to forgive his friends and Lord Yahweh accepted Job’s request. Then Lord Yahweh restored Job to his former wealth and good fortune, only now he had twice as much as before. His brothers and sisters, and his friends and neighbors, joined him in his house to eat together as before and each of them brought Job a gift of money and a gold ring, and sympathized with him for his former loss and rejoiced with him at his new wealth. He counted his new possessions—14,000 sheep, 6,000 camels, 1000 yoke of oxen—and a new family with seven sons and three daughters. There were no women in the land as beautiful as his daughters. Job gave his daughters an inheritance along with their brothers. They lived happily thereafter and Job lived to enjoy his great grandchildren.

Most scholars believe this story is consciously fictitious and was written as a philosophical discussion of an issue that has troubled human beings from the earliest times to now—in a rational world how do we explain the troublesome problem that bad things happen to good people. This story has been the basis for countless arguments and has provided the theme for major literary works and philosophical debates on whether the concept of god is compatible with the reality of evil.

Put bluntly by Archibald MacLeish in his dramatic parody *J.B.*, “if God is god, he is not good. If god is good, he is not god.” Put in harsher words, he means that if there is a god and that god allows undeserved suffering, pain and tragedy to exist without doing something about it, then we must question his character. On the other hand, if he cannot do anything about suffering, then we must ask ourselves whether a powerless god is an oxymoron.

The point of this story seems to be that life is arbitrary, there is undeserved suffering, that ultimately the issue is not innocence or guilt but the whim of Lord Yahweh.